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Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 1 - Chapter Prologue

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Prologue

‘There are probably two types of geniuses, I suppose –’

Bajin was thinking as he ran down a poorly-lit stairway, skipping three steps at a time.

The hero-type that appeared as demanded by the times, and the oddball-type that spontaneously sprung forth that couldn’t care less about such things. One was neither better nor worse than the other. But what Bajin could only say from his actual experience was that, the troubles experienced by an average person who had spent time with the latter was anything but ordinary.

“Professor! I’m coming in!”

Following a kick which threatened to smash the ill-fitted door, he was greeted by the usual stuffy air of the underground laboratory upon entering the room. Scribbled memo pads, boiling chips for experiments, and other things of that nature were chaotically scattered on the floor such that there was nearly nowhere to place one’s feet.

“W-wha?! Jeez… to think I just cleaned up yesterday…”

Bajin sighed without thinking but quickly recovered himself and started walking, heedless of the littered objects. What heed did he need to pay? At any rate, most of the things in this room would be left just as they were.

“Professor! Please answer me, Professor Anarai!”

When he raised his voice, something moved in the deepest part of the poorly-lit room. A small old man straightened his back, and with a lamp in one hand, appeared as he shook his white coat that was smudged with paint.

“Don’t shout, Bajin. I almost messed up the finishing touches, you know.”

A paint brush dyed pale yellow was held in this old man’s right hand. Bajin drew his eyebrows together.

“Finishing touches you say… Just what on earth were you doing bringing out those painting tools?

“Umm, want to see? The surface still isn’t dry though.”

When he followed Anarai to the depths of the room, there were four dolls lined up colored red, blue, green, and yellow respectively. Even though you could call them humanoids, they were as tall as Bajin’s knee with large heads and small limbs. In a manner of speaking, their bodies were like figures deformed[1] to the size of two and a half of their heads.

But generally, people would not call these figures humanoids. Because, while these beings that had taken such a form were a different existence from humans, they had been existing naturally alongside the humans. They were the so-called –.

“— four great elemental spirits……right?”

“That’s right. Made by Anarai Kahn, ‘artificial spirit’ prototypes.”

Urged on by Anarai, who gave a very satisfied snort, Bajin turned and viewed the dolls in order from the right side. To begin, the first one… was the green-painted doll. On its stomach, a round hole imitated from an actual “air tunnel” was opened. There was a breeze flowing from inside.

“This is a wind spirit isn’t it? Its power…”

When Bajin bent over and peeped through the hole, first the six propeller blades that created the circulating wind came into his view, and furthermore on the opposite side, he could confirm a small animal running continuously on a hamster wheel connected to the blades. If you listened closely, the animal made a squeaking sound.

“…is that a mouse…?”

“It was in this area, and besides, for creatures that could become a power source, there weren’t any other candidates.”

“So we’re a group that privately entrusts everything to a mouse, necessarily right?”

Bajin retorted, expressing his disappointment to the manufacturer, and turned his attention to the next “artificial spirit.”

“This one is blue, so it’s a water spirit… I see, liquid comes out from the ‘spout’ on its body, right?”

“The parts of its head and body use an open-close system. You can open it and look inside.”

As said by Anarai, when you exposed the ‘water spirit’s’ insides, first there was a small water tank inside the head. In the water tank rocks were layered from coarse pebbles the size of eyes to fine sand, and muddy water gathered above that. Not only did clear water seep from the filter paper that was spread on the very bottom of the water tank, it poured into a pipe directed to an organ that resembled a faucet, which would be called a ‘water spout’ if it were a real water spirit.

“…this is certainly it. It’s what the professor made a long time ago, the ‘filtration mechanism’, was it?”

“That’s right. With this arrangement, impurities are filtered from muddy water, and we are able to acquire clean water.”

Bajin tasted the water collected in the teacup placed under the faucet and creased his eyebrows.

“…Professor. This water, reeks awfully of mud though.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem in terms of drinkability, but it seems like there’s an issue with the filter paper’s strength and fiber density.”

While amazed at Anarai, who spoke casually, Bajin placed his gaze on the neighboring spirit. Outside the color, there was a point where it different from the other three, and there were caps worn above its hands which were raised as if performing a banzai.

“The next one is a fire spirit… so that means as expected flames come out of the ‘fire chambers’ on its hands?”

“Umm, go look.”

As he removed the round caps covering hands, Anarai smoothly took flints from his lab coat pocket and struck them in the ‘fire spirit’s’ immediate proximity. The very instant he wondered whether sparks were produced when the rocks clashed, the force of the fire expanded exponentially and burned through the air.

“Ahh! That’s dangerous!”

“Inside this ‘fire spirit,’ distilled oil of high purity is gathered. As you know, when you neglect the substance called oil, it slowly volatilizes… that is to say, it evaporates. The oil evaporates from holes opened in its hands, so I gathered that inside the caps and lit the fire, that’s the reasoning.”

“Rather than an explanation, please consider the pros and cons of trying that inside a room covered with flammable things!”

While brushing off his lightly burned coat cuff, Bajin looked at the last of the ‘artificial spirits’ with watering eyes. Same as the wind spirit from the start, there was a hole opened in the center of its body, and a mysterious, faint light was coming from that place, which was capped with glass.

“A ‘light cavity’ in its body… a light spirit, right? But this light, just how…”

When Bajin, taken with curiosity, brought his face closer and peeked at the inside of the hole, on the opposite side of the thin glass cap, countless black shadows wriggled busily. The instant he realized what they were, the several hundred things releasing small lights from their tails, goosebumps stood on Bajin’s entire body and he drew back.

“These, aren’t they light insects? What a gross sound, where did you capture this many!?”

“What do you mean by gross sound! Before being emotionally disgusted, if you’re my assistant, look at the true nature of things. These insects, you see, are living proofs which teach us that a light unaccompanied by ‘flames’ and ‘great temperatures’ is not a privilege only of light spirits.”

“N-no, that might be true, but…”

Trying his best to chase away the afterimage of insects burned into his retina, Bajin eyed the face of his teacher, who was shorter than him by one head.

“…Professor. To be honest, this time I suffered understandingly.”

“Uh huh…”

“It was the objective of making these ‘artificial spirits,’ you see. I know that Professor has researched and observed spirits for a long time, but what are these ridiculous sub-par imitations supposed to do? I can’t think of anything other than thoughtlessly provoking the Cult. Don’t tell me that you really thought you could artificially reproduce the existence of spirits.”

“You, too, think that’s impossible, do you?”

“It’s difficult isn’t it? At the present time, we can’t even produce a single insect.”

Without even refuting that harsh opinion, Anarai gazed motionlessly at the four prototypes he had created. He couldn’t measure the wise old man’s thoughts, but right now Bajin didn’t have the time to carelessly guess at them.

Without saying anything, Bajin turned to Aranai and thrust at him the paper he had been tightly holding in one hand the whole time.

“…what is this?”

“You should have a vague idea; it’s a final warning from the Church of Alderah! Time is precious so I’ll read and summarize the contents for you… ‘To Anarai Kahn, Blasphemer of God. In spite of even repeated warnings, the field of research has until now exceedingly misaligned to God’s will, those behaviors have greatly departed from God’s forbearance. By midday in three days, bring the results of your wickedness in their entirety and surrender yourself to the temple. If not so, friend and doomed sufferer of the severe punishment for having committing heresy, then until next time’…”

With Bajin having read this far, Anarai cleared his throat and gave a sarcastic laugh.

“Again Blasphemer of God, I’m rather disliked by the people of the Cult…. so we necessarily have to take responsibility for the research results here and within three days go to the temple to beg for forgiveness?”

“That’s how it is. We’ve had warnings several times until now, but this time the temperature is clearly different. Not mentioning three days from now, even tomorrow, the steel-cane-wielding heresy interrogation building may knock on this door.”

“If they’re serious, that is possible. We who’ve lost the patrons we were fortunate to have will be rescued from capital punishment.”

“This isn’t someone else’s problem, you know…. Up to now, even I, the lowly ‘Apprentice of Anarai,’ was resolved to follow you to hell from the beginning, but…. Professor, what do you plan to do from now?

That was asked by the assistant in a serious tone, and Anarai breathed a sigh and viewed the inside of the room.

“…in the place this world has become, the eyes of God are shining. Unsatisfied with merely everything on Earth, one by one, books’ contents and words- until He arrives at people’s hearts, that God will keep watch for us from the heavens.…”

“…”

“If that is uncomfortable, as the ones who launched this research room…moldy and dim, yet our dear sanctuary, we can at least wish, ‘I want to forget God,’ even only while researching. Now shall we place the wrath of God in front of us like candle where the wind blows?”

“I’ll guess at your intention. The Cult’s theologists, will not understand your ‘science,’ however you explain it. ‘For all logical foundations, God must exist’… By just blindly believing those kinds of commandments from the Alderah Theology, you can’t firmly recognize the research of genuine truth.”

“Right, ‘science’… the study for people who lament God’s guidance. This and that, it’s everything we studied here.”

The moment Anarai impassionately muttered, the bell dangling down from the roof sounded a shrill warning. After that, the iron door that separated the space creaked at a rough knock. The two tensed their entire bodies and exchanged glances.

“…So they came without waiting a day after they sent the warning, did they? As we anticipated, they’re a quick tempered lot.”

Grumbling in an amazed voice, Anarai turned his body and walked halfway to his own desk. There, he took a short pause, changed his mind, and unexpectedly began tidying up.

“—Bajin, we’re stopping this business. Let’s abandon it, not including the data, which I’d quite like for to remain. What? The results are all stored in our minds, learning isn’t picky about location to begin with. As for what’s next, let’s escape more cleverly from the eyes of God as much as we can.”

“Y-yes!… But Professor, do you have any prospects? No matter where we run to in this country— the Katjvarna Empire, wouldn’t the Cult come pursue us persistently?”

“I just said that learning isn’t picky about location, but the prospect doesn’t have to be in the Empire. The neighboring Kioka Republic has as much capacity as to champion the founding of an artisan nation and accept people like us.”

“Kioka…!? They’re the neighbors we’re in the middle of a war with! Do we have the connections to seek asylum?”

“There is a considerable number of ‘Apprentices of Anarai’ even over there. Using my correspondence so far, I’ve established negotiations. Your walking stick before you stumble[2], right?… Now, Bajin, where is your fire spirit friend?”

“R-right. Raga is burning trash in the rear incinerator now, but…”

“There is fire in the furnace then. Good timing- there are things I’d hate for to be confiscated by those closed-minded folks. I’ll have you go ahead and stoke the fire. That’s all this ‘’unwelcome’’ person will ask of you.”

Having received his instructions, Bajin rushed out from the back door and hurriedly climbed the stairs leading above ground.

After seeing off that back-turned figure, Anarai turned his eyes to his own desk and took up a massive quantity of papers carefully bound with string using both arms.

“The records of my talks with my apprentices, scattered throughout the world… If it were reasonable, I’d want to take these to Kioka. But with this amount, I think that’d be difficult…”

With his eyes he gazed at several letters, and while muttering the names of the senders one by one, Anarai slowly climbed up the stairwell. Just for now, he didn’t care about the pursuers quickly approaching there. For an old dog, they barely equaled the letters sent by distantly scattered sons and daughters.

“Yorga was absurdly strong in arithmetic. Milvakiah was a lover of extreme logic. Nazuna

was one who could simplify and explain difficult arguments and just wanted to be at hand as an assistant. Ikta was…”

The moment that name left his mouth, the voice narrating the story slightly weakened. Rather than nostalgia, or fondness— concerning the owner of that name, the memory of pain took precedence within Anarai.

“Ikta Solork, without interest in following the method of ‘science’ I advocated, implemented sublimation by a peculiar philosophy. He was a sensitive kid similar to you, Bada. You can have pride in the shadows of the grave.”

As he finished climbing the stairs, when he opened the iron window installed to the brick wall, the incinerator on the other side was already blazing thunderously. Overcoming slight hesitation, then throwing a sheaf of paper into it, Anarai, in front of the several memories returning to ash, stood still with a solemn expression.

“Until these circumstances settle down, it’s a brief farewell, ‘Apprentices of Anarai.’ Soon, let’s make sure to meet again. Next time, I pray, in the midst of a wilderness of reasoning to which God’s eyes cannot reach.”

When he finished the farewell, Anarai closed the incinerator window, turned his heel, and didn’t look back a second time.

Year 904 of the Empirical Era Anarai Kahn, “scientist” of the historical beginning, escaped the Katjvarna Empire with one assistant. Thereafter, continuing research at their destination for asylum, the Kioka Republic.

Translator’s Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ written as: 戯画化 (caricaturization); read as: デフォルメ (deformation)
2. Jump up↑ proverb: 転ばぬ先の杖 (A stitch in time saves nine, prevention is better than the cure)

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 1 - Chapter 1

The Empire at Twilight

In the Katjvarna territory, the four seasons basically don't exist. It's the tropics.

There is no spring nor autumn, and, of course, no winter. There is only the season when the general of summer seriously attacks, and the one when he slightly loosens his hand. One could call half of the Empire's history the history of the fight with this brave general.

Therefore, between the slender and tall dipterocarp trees— the figure of somebody fast asleep with his body entrusted to a hanging hammock was possibly the form of humanity's triumph against the general of summer.

"Ikta, please wake up, Ikta."

A small, lovable humanoid "something" climbed aboard that someone's chest, which rose and fell with the breathing of his slumber, and shook the body eagerly. A large face and short limbs, a round form, a "light cavity" in his body. That form was undeniably a light spirit, one pillar of the elemental spirits which served as the good partners of humanity.

"…Nnn…what is it, Kusu? Didn't I say I'd sleep through the graduation ceremony?…"

Taking off the hat that shaded his face, the somebody took up the light spirit called Kusu with both hands. He was a black-haired, sleepy-eyed youth. The shirt and navy blue pants worn on his body were unrecognizably misshapen, but it was possible that they were a uniform that in some way matched with the hat.

"So, it ended."

"…Hmm?"

While staring up and down at the spirit held in his arms, the sleepy-eyed youth— Ikta tilted his head.

"If progress was as planned, the Imperial Segal Grand Academy's 131st Term Graduation Ceremony ended just about now, and they should be shifting to the Communal Meal between graduates and guardians. Would it be unwise to have a meal here?"

Hearing that, Ikta casually turned his gaze to the skies, and, indeed, the sun had risen considerably compared to when he looked before he slept.

"Certainly, this is terrible. Let's miss this meal, even though it's free."

Ikta, having sluggishly lowered his body from the hammock and stood on the ground, stretched widely. His back cracked, his sleepy conscious just then awoke, and all at once his hunger and thirst attacked.

"Ugh, I have a headache… light dehydration, I wonder?"

"It's because you slept a long time in this heat. First, let's stop by a well and replenish our water supply."

Ikta brought the body of Kusu who so advised him to the special pouch he attached to his own hip and snugly stored him there. For the slow-footed spirit, that was the default

position during travel.

“Well, shall I endure it just a little? Just for today, since it’s a waste to quench our thirst with tepid water.”

After quickly retrieving the hammock from the tree trunks, Ikta, even while grimacing from his headache, started running through the inside the forest in high spirits.

“I’m Yahg the physical education instructor, congratulations on your graduation, Miss Igsem. Ah, the High Grade Military Officer Exam is drawing closer before you. I think that you of all people will definitely pass, but don’t relax even a little alright?”

“I receive your advice gratefully, Instructor Yahg. I’m thinking of putting the things I learned here to best use in practice.”

After the graduation ceremony, the Academy president’s long speech, having calculatingly joined forces with the fierce heat, actually sent eight students out to the medical room. Finally, Yatorishino Igsem of those who moved to the Communal Lunch under the grand pavilion as per the schedule, not being able to dine properly, was savoring the annoyances of being an honor student.

“Oh, Yatorishino-kun, congratulations on your graduation. I’m Kobakk from educational guidance. As expected of the top of her class. Are you also expecting the same results from the High Grade Military Officer Exam?”

“Thank you very much, Instructor Kobakk. I wish devote my whole energy to meet expectations.”

—The top student understands it, even without you guys saying. So let me go already!

While she continued the unpleasant reception, in actuality, nothing but that was repeating in her mind.

If they came just to congratulate her on graduating, that would still be okay. There was no helping that she felt unhappy that, after words of congratulations, each and every one of the instructors added their own names. Furthermore, that type of people generally, in school life up to now, was a group with weak connections to Yatori.

Afraid of being forgotten, they tried to make even a small impression from the start. It was a ridiculous idea. But still, as the top of her class who combined her character with wisdom and courage, she had to take on a manner devoted to etiquette.

“Ah, alright! The second serving of ice cream is here!”

Yatori’s ears twitched at the detail exclaimed by another student in the near vicinity…. Ice cream!

As might be expected from the congratulation of the graduates of the Imperial Grand Academy, fancy cuisine to match the occasion was lined up on the tables of the assembly hall. Fish fry covered with plenty of spices, meat soup boiled with a mountain of spices, mixed rice boiled together with so many spices that you’d die. The flavor of spices, which were used for the purpose of sterilization, seasoning, and metabolism acceleration, was an essential characteristic of Katjvarna. Since Yatori was accustomed to the stuff itself, she

didn’t mind it.

However, she just now came from the president’s long speech. She was all out of such things like sweat, and the temperature of her lips, dry and papery, surpassed the normal by two degrees. Eat foods with plenty of spices and accelerate metabolism → sweat and get a refreshing coolness- there was no need for her to undergo so irritating a practice as she had been until now. Yatori’s body desired a more direct “coolness.”

One way or the other finishing the conversation with the instructors at an appropriate place, she turned to the direction of the voice from earlier and started walking with a quick pace. Ice cream— that was undeniably the most appealing sound to anyone in this country.

File:Alderamin v01 027.png

Her fingers, as they took the spoon handle, overlapped with the fingers of a youth trying to reach for it at the same time.

In Katjvarna, far from the snow and never even having had frost fall, the only ones that could make the precious gem called ice were the water spirits. In addition to that, they couldn’t make a lot at once, and the majority of it circulated as an industrial coolant. The luxury of “eating ice” was a pleasure only for days with special, joyous things.

Given out to many hands, the remaining amount now was in a precarious state. Yatori, barely enduring the urge to starting running despite doing nothing but praying that enough for her remained, finally arrived in front of the plate.

She breathed a sigh of relief without thinking. The ice cream on top of the large plate was really only a small amount, which if scraped together and served on a small plate would finally be enough for one person. It was by a hair’s breadth…. While imagining the coolness of the ice slipping down her throat, she placed a hand on the serving spoon-

“Ah.”

Her fingers, as they took the spoon handle, overlapped with the fingers of a youth trying to reach for it at the same time.

“…Ikta.”

“Ah, Yatori. Congratulations on graduating. As expected of the top of her class. I’m proud to be in the same year.”

While giving the false compliment, the black-haired youth resistantly put strength into the tightly gripped spoon. Yatori also did the same. Grappling with the spoon from left and right, the two squared off in front of the plate.

“…You, didn’t show up at the graduation ceremony right?”

“Well, that was rude of me. My heart was always together with everyone.”

“I have no interest in the your peculiar, conveniently detachable heart. So, where was the main body?”

“Overpowered by sleep in the forest behind the school. I couldn’t help worrying about how many people collapsed this year.”

“Eight people were incapacitated by listening…. So, you, who for some reason skipped the graduation ceremony, only show up for the Communal Lunch like nothing happened?”

“Because of this, there was no lunch today in the dormitories. Even if you let me sleep through the graduation ceremony, dining is compulsory.”

“Like I’d accept your excuse. Anyway, remove your hand.”

To Yatori who ordered in a threatening tone, Ikta shrugged his shoulders and gave a villainous smile.

“To think that the world-famous top graduate can’t concede one plate of ice cream to another person…”

“Ngh.”

“I’m disappointed… The teachers would probably be disgusted. To think that the someone such as the eldest daughter of the Igsem Family would be so shameful…”

Drawn out by the reference to her family’s honor, strength gradually left Yatori’s hand. Ikta, having successfully stolen the serving spoon, gleefully served the remaining ice cream on a small plate.

“As expected of Yatorishino Igsem. Her pride higher than a mountain, her heart larger than than the ocean. It seems I truly have a good friend— Ah, ow!?”

The moment he brought the filled plate to his body, a tingling numbness ran through Ikta’s left arm. Without drawing attention, Yatori’s quickly dispatched fist hit the nerves in his elbow. Firmly catching the plate slipping out of his hand mid-fall and claiming it as her own, Yatori gave a triumphant smile.

“Thank you for going out of your way to serve it for me, Ikta-kun. A gentleman does things ladies first.”

“The result is the honor of receiving of your praise.”

Ikta retorted despite having lost the argument, rubbing his elbow with tearing eyes.

“…Mm~m.”

The coolness and sweetness spreading in her mouth, the scent of cinnamon leaving her nose, the sensation of ice cream thawed by her body heat sliding down her throat. Yatori was shivering at sensuality of those things while mindlessly holding the spoon in her mouth.

“I’m being restored to life. Ice cream is the best.”

“That’s so true isn’t it? On the other hand, I’m hot and about to die. No, I’ve been dead for a long time.”

With a drink in a porcelain cup in one hand, Ikta was slouching on a bench set up in a corner of the party hall. He was glaring resentfully at Yatori’s blissful expression with a sidelong glance.

“How exaggerated. The palm wine is chilled in itself, isn’t it?”

“The alcohol[1] is weak and it wasn’t fermented enough. Therefore, I won’t acknowledge this stuff as alcohol.”

Despite saying that, Ikta, with a large jug of palm wine placed on his bench, was draining the contents of his cup and pouring himself several refills from there. When his thirst was finally quenched, he came with both arms filled to capacity with food from the tables and began eating incessantly.

“Nng…mmm…. Considering that this is a party for the Imperial Grand Academy, the quality of the food being served is equal to the Empire’s dignity. The reality that it’s declining is an alarming thing, you know, Yatori-kun.”

“Be quiet. Because normal students- unlike you, who slips in every year- only attend once, the quality of the food isn’t something they care about, you know.”

While speaking, Yatori carried the last spoonful of ice cream to her mouth with a trace of regret. She absentmindedly gazed at the table, but there was currently no sign that more would come. She couldn’t help but be reminded of Ikta’s speech.

“Damn, I guess that was the end of this year’s ice cream. In any case, it’s because the price of the milk and honey sprinkled on top of the ice, which is produced directly in the kitchen, seems to have risen quite a lot since the year began.”

Thus complaining, Ikta, as if giving into despair, swigged palm wine.

Stored in the pouch on his waist, his partner, the light spirit Kusu, raised his eyes appearing anxious about the circumstances.

“Ikta, drink alcohol moderately. It’s harmful to the body.”

“I guess so, Kusu. Opportunities in which I can drink enough to harm my body are rare, you know.”

While watching that usual back and forth between the two, Yatori innocently brought her hand to her right hip and caressed the face of her partner being stored there. With “fire chambers” in both hands, he was the deep-red fire spirit Shia.

“It seems you’re having difficulties as always, Kusu. Shia is worried as well.”

“Thank you very much, Yatori. Shia has blessed with a responsible master.”

“Agreement.”

After speaking only that with a sigh, Shia became silent for a second time.

He seemed cold, but considering the two, he was closer to a spirit’s standard mode. A spirit’s personality was shaped by accepting his master’s influence, but ones with communication abilities as high as Kusu’s were rare, and spirits attached to soldiers were especially liable to becoming uncommunicative.

“Ah, Yatori-sama! Congratulations on graduating at the top of your class!”

Having found Yatori’s figure, six students from the crowd came to encourage her. Certainly not handling them coldly, she answered them with a smile, the same as when she addressed the instructors.

“Thank you. Also, congratulations to you, too.”

When a voice was returned from Yatori, the students who came to have a conversation, regardless of gender, became excited. Her red hair extending past her shoulders with its intermingling tips curling in and out, the pupils of her large eyes seeming to symbolize intelligence and sincerity, her stylishly-worn uniform unwrinkled by the heat. That was a figure as if dignity were painted in a picture.

With excellence in both the military and literary arts united with a personal history as a descendant of the Distinguished Igsem Family of the Classical Military Factions, Yatorishino Igsem received greater expectations and respect from students in the same class than anyone else…. But, to that extent, the companion together with in her an unbecoming situation, he was exceedingly conspicuous.

“…Umm. Possibly, are you involved with Ikta Solork?”

Sure enough, the one girl who noticed the existence of the dead drunk “unbecoming someone-san” whispered to Yatori in a lowered voice.

“Eh? No, we’re just talking a bit.”

“You shouldn’t keep company with that kind of good-for-nothing. Stupidity is contagious.”

Yatori only responded to that harsh evaluation with a vague smile. The girl continued even closer to Yatori’s ear.

“…Either I’m mistaken about something, or there is a rumor that this guy is also taking the High Grade Military Officer Exam. I think that he’ll fail it quickly in any case, but please be careful that you aren’t distracted by him.”

Yatori, being who she was, suppressed a snicker at that girl’s words, but, leaving that aside, the girl quickly changed the topic

“Anyway, Yatori-sama. When will you go to actual combat as a commander?”

Since she didn’t so much as take the Exam yet, there was a limit to how hasty one could be. But, of course, without revealing those kinds of true feelings, Yatori politely answered her innocent question.

“I can’t say anything yet, but normally it seems that after training for four~five years, you receive a rank and from there you can handle being an official military officer.”

“Four years… I hope it’s much faster because you’re Yatori, but I wonder if you can’t make it in time.”

“Make it in time…. What are you talking about?”

When Yatori tilted her head and asked for an explanation, this time a boy from behind her answered.

“Her relatives live in Katjvarna’s Eastern Province. Hey… right now our[2] Eastern Stronghold is repulsing the invasion from the Kioka Republic National Army, right?”

“Yeah, Yatorishino-san was just saying how it would be fun if she went as a reinforcement.”

Another boy added more. Without noticing that Yatori didn't respond, they continued.

"But still, to go that far, even the guys from the Republic would abandon the invasion. In any case, it's because the Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Stronghold is that great Hazaaf Rikan-dono. He is a little distressed now by the New Division, whose status is unknown, but he'll bring it under control soon…"

"Have your relatives escapes quickly. The Eastern Province will fall at the hands of the Kioka Army in less than a month."

Ikta blandly inserted words into the middle of the conversation. At that sinister detail, the group creased their eyebrows.

"…Wait. What do you mean by that?"

"What I said. The Eastern Stronghold will collapse and that whole area will be seized by the Kioka Republic. I pity Lieutenant General Rikan. If he didn't have a tight choker, this kind of result wouldn't be necessary."

"I can't let that go unchallenged, Ikta Solork. The Eastern Stronghold led by Lieutenant General Rikan is currently devoting its full energy to repelling the barbaric invasion. Since that's the case, why are you assuming defeat?"

"And belief in certain victory invites consequences. But defeatists like you probably won't understand."

That large group unanimously opposing Ikta were students decided on being involved with the military for their career after graduation. At their root was the blind faith to act in accordance with their own nation's army, changing its name to the abandonment of thinking called "belief in certain victory," and even producing a foolish optimism about the war situation in the Eastern Province.

"I heard a rumor that you're taking the High Grade Military Officer Exam, but- ha- are you sober? Before passing or not passing, consider whether the Imperial Army wants a coward like you, 'Ikta the Lazy.'"

"Nothing but skipping lectures and practical skills lessons. If we talk about what you do in that time, afternoon naps, idleness, and picking up women come to mind. A refined specimen of a good-for-nothing, master of deadbeat life— that's you, don't you agree, Ikta Solork?"

"Look, he has no words to say back."

"Come on guys, don't be that way. This is a day for celebration, so let's enjoy it without fighting."

In the middle of everything, those words from Yatori elicited only restraint from everyone else. When they left with slightly dissatisfied expressions, the remaining Yatori sighed and began to ask the youth next to her a question.

"…So it's true, it's really collapsing? The Eastern Stronghold."

"Do you think that a boxer who could block a fist would have a chance at winning?"

Ikta's example was simple and sharp. While pouring a refill of palm wine into his cup, he

continued.

“If you think calmly, it’s something you understand quickly, isn’t it? The main point, why is the Eastern Stronghold trembling even now in the action zone? The ‘Stronghold’ is a standing local military organization during peacetime. Since over three months have passed since the Kioka Army’s invasion began, if we’re seriously planning to win the war, it’s strange that they weren’t able to send military forces from Central a long time ago and replace ‘’the Eastern Province District Army’’.”

The Stronghold that was a standing organization, concerning the insufficient mobility of the military, had the power to protect but not the power to attack. “A boxer who could block a fist,” which Ikta used as an example was like that. The troops without the ability to make an assertive attack for that reason were under the pressure of a defensive battle they couldn’t foresee.

“That one has no hope of winning with a non-aggressive defense is basics of the basics of military science. Because you’ll just be caught off guard and overehelmed. The current Eastern Stronghold is on the verge of that… no, is it worse? Because the New Division recently released by the Kioka Army into the war has slipped our guard and is causing damage.”

“… You mean the Aerial Warfare Unit, right? Certainly, that’s a threat the Empire didn’t predict.”

Yatori nodded unpleasantly. —The Aerial Warfare Unit. That was the Kioka Army’s New Division, organized to resemble countless soldiers riding blimps. They crossed the national border from the skies and invaded Imperial territory, visiting and dropping large quantities of flaming oil on towns and army facilities that had been turned into supply relay points.

As a result of the flying altitude being too high, there were currently no measures on the Empire’s side to directly counter Aerial Warfare. From a distant height that neither arrows nor bullets could reach, they could continue causing damage to the Empire. This accumulation of damage would cause the troops of the Eastern Stronghold to suffer over time.

“From the start of the ‘air bombings’ from Aerial Warfare until now, already how many towns have been burned…? No, if only houses are being burned, then that’s still fine. They burn field crops, burn granaries, and the towns can’t maintain a food supply. The Stronghold’s troops are the same. Concerning food these days, they should already be in a state of distress.”

“But the supplies from Central should have arrived.”

“The amount to distribute to all of the people burned out of their homes by the air raids? There’s no way Central has that kind of surplus. Hypothetically, even if they do send it, can they continue that endlessly from now? Even though they have no expectations of winning the main war?”

Saying that, Ikta slumped, lying down on the bench. As if, ridiculously, that was just about everything he to want to say.

“More than anything, I pity the Commander-in-Chief of the Stronghold, Hazaaf Rikan. The commanding of a lost battle would certainly be bitter, wouldn’t it? This and that, everything was the negligence of the Emperor and Ministry who have no intention waging war seriously.”

“Put an end to it there, Ikta. As I expected, this isn’t the place for this.”

Wary of eavesdroppers in the surroundings, Yatori warned against his speech. The Katjvarna Imperial Family was sacred, forbidden territory. To say nothing of the current wartime, casually speaking those criticisms wouldn’t be tolerated. Particularly, it would invariably involve the contributions of a descendant of a Distinguished Family of the Classical Military Factions, Yatori, with the responsibility… One couldn’t speak carelessly.

“First, rather than talking about a war we can’t influence, there is currently a more constructive topic for us, right?”

“Hnn…? Ahh, this evening’s Graduation Festival? I want to go all out the whole night. Where should I go to drink?”

“You just drunk to your heart’s content! I meant the High Grade Military Officer Exam.”

While holding Kusu face up in his arms, Ikta made a sour face as if he had swallowed a bug.

“Ah— that depressing event was also left…”

“Even if you’re indisposed, I’ll have you participate… Really, you do understand it’s significance right?”

Drawing closer in direction Ikta’s head as he declined, Yatori whispered in a small voice inaudible to their surroundings.

“…Using the Igsem Family connections, I prepared a librarian position at the National Library of the Capital for you. In exchange, I’ll have you take the High Grade Military Officer Exam together with me and fight in my favor during the Secondary Exam Continuation. You also agreed to the deal, right?”

“That’s a given, since the Library of the Capital is the retirement destination for nobility. Lending out various amusements to empty-headed people with riches and leisure time to spare, occasionally maintaining dust-covered, pitiable academic books… just for that, I’d have a sum as my salary so that I wouldn’t need to worry about my next meal. For me, that’s a distant dream. Although I did think that it was a cheap-shot scheme, uncharacteristic of you, Yatori. If it’s you, success is ensured even without something like my help, no?”

“Say what you want. If all I had to do was succeed, then I’d fight with just one arm…. However, the results required of eldest daughter of the Igsem family aren’t just that. The distinction of ‘top success’ is necessary.”

“Haven’t you done nothing but monopolize that distinction with everything from the time at the Academy? It’s about time you surrendered it to someone, you know. You aren’t the only person who wants to sit in the top seat.”

“Look who’s saying that. Just because you didn’t sit in it doesn’t mean I’m the only one who did.”

Hearing that, Ikta stared blankly, possibly in a strange condition due to the heat, picked up Manila clamshells from the plates of food he finished eating, and one by one began placing them on his head. Yatori’s eyebrows drew in doubtfully.

“…Wait, that, what are you doing?”

“Overestimating myself too much.”[3]

Without making any kind of comment, Yatori knocked the Manila clams down from the youth’s head.

“…As I was saying! You aren’t the type to not use the ability that you’re hiding without any meaning. Particularly for this test, it seems that the youngest of the Remeon family is going to appear as a strong candidate. There’s no being too careful. Treading on you, Yatorishino Igsem will record her first step in military rule.”

“Well, I think that’s fine. By what I heard, the league of your fellow Secondary Exam Continuation test-takers doesn’t seem unusual. Being the first to enter battle and preparing military forces are the basics of the basics of military affairs. ‘The many outweigh the few.’”

“If you understand, then that’s fine. Sincerely try not to make a mistake large enough to fail the Primary Written Examination.”

“Yep, I got it, I’ll try my best. Because, unlike you, being involved with the army is the last thing I want to do.”

While responding shamelessly, Ikta skillfully poured a refill of palm wine into cup while lying down.

The High Grade Military Officer Exam—an obstacle which only those who have completed the Childhood Military Discipline Course at a designated educational institution as study material were allowed to challenge, so to speak the first trial that upper echelon cadets needed to surmount to become elite soldiers.

With the case in the army where one Private First Class = two Privates, one couldn’t climb the ranks unless with very large military gains in actual combat, and that promotion reached its limit with the seventh rank from the bottom, the non-commissioned officer “Sergeant Major.” But the High Grade Military Officer Exam was something created with the goal of selecting candidates for commissioned officers, and those who passed it were able to acquire the status of “Warrant Officer,” one rank above “Sergeant Major,” from the beginning. However, the Exam could be taken once per year, up to three times.

Of course, the passing rate was absurdly high. Spanning the entire test, they seldom, if ever, cut by 400 times, and they didn’t reduce by 20 times even with just the Primary Written Examination. But since there was a tendency for the people of the Katjvarna Empire to regard soldiers as heroes, the ones who succeeded at this became objects of adoration. It was a chance to acquire both status and prestige….

“Nnn—, national tactics discourse. How bothersome—”

The existence of Ikta drowsily moving a pencil in the middle of test-takers who were facing and squinting their eyes at exam papers was already shockingly out of place. And yet the answering itself was advancing unusually smoothly from the start that the surrounding test-takers alike only felt ashamed.

“Ahh— the Study of Military Affairs Administration. How tepid—”

Concerning his posture, it was the same as that of a child forced to do summer homework. Cheek propped up, lips curving in an “へ” shape, eyes somewhat like those of a dead fish. So, falling flat the instant he finished the answers for each subject class, and lying that way without fixing his eyes, he didn’t so much as twitch until the collection of exam papers.

“Geh— Alderah Theology. How annoying—”

Depending on the personality of the instructor proctoring the Exam, that was a lack of seriousness quite capable of having him ordered from the room, but it appeared that he was blessed by enough luck to slip by.

And like that, the Exam’s second day arrived, the last subject of which was the “Use of the Military.”

“This is the last one, this is the last one…. Hnn?”

Mechanically filling out exam papers, the hand of Ikta, who was practically in the state of a living corpse, abruptly stopped. The theme of the essay question written on the last of the exam papers seized his eye and didn’t let go.

—Freely state your thoughts concerning the Imperial Army’s former General Bada Sankrei, who previously abandoned the Kioka War and was made into a war criminal.

“…”

For the first time since the Exam began, a question was posed that could leave him at a loss. Based on the style of answer, “freely state,” it wasn’t characteristic of the questions asked the army. There didn’t seem to be an intention to fit a template.

—However, from the contents, he could sense just a slightly nostalgic scent.

Since Ikta, who without thinking instinctively didn’t want to answer, couldn’t really list criticisms of the Imperial Family on the High Grade Military Officer Exam, and since he had belief that he should already be working on matters in another subject, he recorded this short answer.

—Every hero dies of overwork.

At 7:20PM, the Primary Written Examination ended at every venue, and the over 6,000 test-takers were reduced to fewer than 300 as per every year.

About one month after the completion of that Primary Written Examination. Ikta and Yatori, carrying luggage for a journey on their backs, were gazing at the ocean from the harbor with their respective spirits. As a result of the Secondary Examination Continuation

being conducted on the Hirgano Archipelago on the southern side of the Empire, they came to board the transport ship heading to the actual location.

“Things are going just as planned so far, aren’t they? I’m relieved that you passed.”

“It’s because I’d been skipping lectures and doing nothing but exam study ever since the deal was proposed two years ago.”

Ikta answered mixed with a yawn. Unlike the High Grade Military Officer Exam which one can pass with just excellent grades, a librarian position at the National Library of the Capital was exclusive to retiring nobility. Ikta had no chance outside this deal.

“Not that I’m discriminating against library employees, but you’re really working hard for that. It’s not even that you’re particularly a bookworm, right?

“I like books, but if I had to say, any work would be fine. The point is that it’s a librarian at the ‘National’ Library ‘of the Capital.’ If just those parts were the same, then I wouldn’t care even if I were a gardener or a cleaning lady.”

The Katjvarna Empire’s capital Banhataal was the Empire’s core both geographically and politically. Hypothetically, even if the war situation with the Kioka Republic worsened after this, it would be the last of the last to be persecuted. The welfare program was also generous for employees of a national institution like the Library. To be blunt, it was a position in which one could slack off until the nation was on the brink of ruin.

“Once this deal goes smoothly, if I can idle away like that until I die. Two years worth of exam study is cheap, you know? Since I hate wasting effort, I’m not stingy with that amount: the effort needed for myself to slack off.”

“Haa…. I see. So you’re that kind of person.”

Sighing with half disgust and half admiration, Yatori gazed at the great ocean spreading out before her eyes. On the ocean surface, the waves were low and the winds calm. It was hatefully clear weather. The beach air smelled like a mix of sand and salt.

“The ship is here, Ikta. Come now, Yatori and Shia should go, too.”

Urged on by the light spirit Kusu stored in the pouch on Ikta’s hip, the two lined up and went walking in the ship’s direction.

From the medium-sized ship coming along the harbor, sailors recognizable as soldiers with one glance got off and scrutinizingly appraised Ikta and Yatori’s full lengths.

“Your exam admission tickets.”

After confirming exam admissions tickets from both of them, the sailors silently prompted to the two to board. When they boarded, there were no frivolous ornaments, characteristically of army furnishings, but it was a generally attentively maintained, sanitary ship. The guest cabins to which they were guided, despite being narrow, still had beds stacked three levels high on the left and right—furthermore, an earlier guest was there.

“…Ahh, good afternoon. Perhaps, are you also test-takers?”

The one who spoke with an expression that mixed nervousness and relief, was a tall girl

with pale blue hair. Her partner, a water spirit, was sitting on her lap. It was a gentle impression in contrast with the firm Yatori.

“It seems so. I’m Yatorishino Igsem. A 131st Term graduate of the Imperial Segal Grand Academy. My partner is the fire spirit Shia. This is Ikta Solork from the same year and the light spirit Kusu…. You are?”

Slightly surprised by the family name Igsem which Yatori mentioned, she immediately returned a self-introduction.

“I-I’m extremely grateful. Umm, I’m an 11th Term graduate of the Imperial Min Mihaela Nursing Academy, Haroma Bekkel. This little one is my partner, the water spirit Miru. Igsem-san, Solork-san, please be kind to me.”

Sitting on the bed opposite Haroma, Yatori added words in a gentle tone.

“We didn’t settle on using our family names. Yatori is fine, you know.”

“Please, if you would, call me Ik-kun with affection.”

Haroma gave a small laugh at Ikta’s behavior as he teased her with a pompous tone.

“You can ignore this person’s joke, Haroma-san. If you go along, you’ll be sucked in by his manner.”

“Hehe… you two get along well, don’t you? Then, if you’d like, please call me Haro. Since my acquaintances all call me that.”

“I’ll impose on your words, Haro…. Your partner is a water spirit, and you yourself come from a Nursing Academy, so I wonder if your targeted Division is the Medics?”

“It’s as you say. While I’m embarrassed about this, it’s my third time as a test-taker, and this is the first time I passed the Written Examination. Since it’s my last chance, it would be nice if they would let me survive, but…”

“The Medics Division, compared to others, does have a low success rate, but I think you have plenty of hope. If we end up competing, I can’t go easy, but if there is a way to cooperate, I’d want to join hands.”

With both a smiling tone and expression, Yatori’s innermost thoughts were half honest opinion and half calculations. With preparing the “perfect ally with no interest in passing the Exam” called Ikta as her first military gain, she was now in the phase of acquiring allies locally.

“If we can, that’s reassuring. The eldest daughter of the Igsem Family— I’ve heard rumors of Yatori-san’s fame.”

“Oh, I’m flattered. It would be nice if the actual strength accompanying me was even half of that in the rumors, though…”

When the two began their socializing mixed with modesties, the cabin door opened and a new passenger showed his form. He was a chubby youth with a round face placed on a plump torso. He quickly surveyed the inside of the room, and, startled at one point, widened his eyes.

“Ikta Solork…? W-Why are you here?!”

“Ohh, my buddy Matthew! You passed too? Why how great, how serendipitous!”

Embraced by Ikta who stood up from the bed, the youth called Matthew made an extremely reluctant face. While desperately pushing his companion away, his gaze this time was concentrated on Yatori.

“Tch, Yatorishino… so you’re here too, huh?”

“It’s been a month, hasn’t it, Matthew-kun? I’m glad we were able to meet. It doesn’t seem the same way for you, though.”

“Of course, not. If you had messed up on the Primary Examination, you don’t know how thrilled I’d be.”

Matthew cursed her loathingly. On behalf of Haroma whom he hadn’t met, Yatori inserted an introduction.

“This is Matthew Tetdrich and his partner, the wind spirit Tsuu. He’s in the same year as Ikta and I am. If Haro has a memory of hearing the family name Tetdrich, then please say so. I think he’d be very pleased.”

“What kind of introduction is that?! Whether someone remembers us or not, within the Empire, the Tetdrich Family is still a preeminent Distinguished Family of the Classical Military Factions! It isn’t superior or inferior to ones like Igsem or Remeon!”

“Te-Tetdrich… was it? Umm… If I’ve heard it before or haven’t… It’s not that I don’t feel it’s on the tip of my tongue, but…”

Since Haro unknowingly said something rude, Matthew stamped his feet and ground his teeth in frustration. With that timing, Ikta, as if comforting, or perhaps one should say, as if teasing, clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s fine, Matthew. It’s that major-on-a-minor-scale type of popularity that’s your position. It’s not particularly necessary for all entertainers to have a national fan-base. You’re honestly trying your best on the local route.”

“Just who is an entertainer?! Ahh, come on, whatever is fine, so for the time being, you can let go!”

Followed by Ikta like a ghost in the background, Matthew hugged his knees in a corner of the cabin and sat down in protest. Shaking her head, Yatori restrained Haro, who was trying to say something as if unable to just watch.

“Stand up quietly. In those current circumstances, whatever you say, he’ll take offense to it.”

“H-hahh…. …Somehow, are you used to the treatment?”

“He’s someone I’ve continued entangled with for four years. Ah, but if Ikta is there, coping with it is easy. It’s like using poison to overcome poison.”[4]

Yatori finished talking with a light smile. When she did, the figure of Ikta talking incessantly to Matthew seemed even to Haro like a poisonous snake twined around its prey. Slightly scared, she averted her gaze.

“…Umm, Yatori-san, you’re in the same year as Ikta-san, right?”

“Yeah. He’s a friend from since we enrolled in the Grand Academy. Well, it’s a strange coincidence, but you might say I got stuck with him.”

As Yatori spoke mixed with a sarcastic laugh, Haro, bringing her mouth slightly closer to her ear, asked in an even smaller voice.

“Umm, Matthew-san also seems the same way, so, then as I expected, Ikta-san is also a descendant of a Distinguished—”

“Hahaha, no~o way. Solork is the name of an orphanage, young lady.”

With laughter suddenly in her ear, Haro without thinking cried “Hyaa?!” and turned around. Ikta, who seemed to have come unnoticed from Matthew’s side, had shamelessly encamped next to her and was laughing hysterically.

“A descendant of a Distinguished Family, you said? I have no father and no mother. At the time, I found Kusu when he was working at the Solork Orphanage, collapsed and dying in a decaying vacant basement. I’ve been with that little guy ever since. Also, luckily since I wasn’t that stupid, I was allowed to attend the Grand Academy on a scholarship.”

“Ah, so that’s what happened. Excuse me, I asked something rude based on my interest… Kyaa?!”

“It’s fine, I don’t mind~ Since I’ll also do considerably rude things to you from now on.”

After having the back of her hand caressed, an erotic voice rose from Haro’s mouth. While watching the spectacle, Yatori held her face with one hand as if to say, “so it’s started again…”

“Tall, aren’t you… slender. You’re even five fingers taller than a boy like me…”

“Hya, I’m 176cm….[5] Excuse me, in spite of being a girl, I’m meaninglessly tall…”

“Doesn’t it just mean you have good physical development…? … Ah, your fingers are a little rough. Do you normally do housework by yourself?”

“I-I have five younger brothers, and I’m their older sister… Hyaa! Don’t stroke my upper arm…!”

“The eldest daughter of six siblings? My goodness, that’s incredible, no, stressful…. What do your parents do?”

“T-They’re renting fields from the lord in the area…. But the earnings from just that aren’t enough, if I don’t get promoted and send money— Yaa, don’t pinch my earlobe, or comb through my hair…!”

The touching that began with the back of her hand, making that its origin, steadily advanced in the direction of her body. To be honest, Yatori thought that it was amusing, but since it’d reach a refinement unsuitable for pictures if it continued, before that happened, she decided to grab Ikta by the nape of his neck and stop him.

“We’re stopping there, Ikta. Save picking up women for another time.”

“Ohh, too bad.”

After he was tossed away by Yatori, Ikta returned to the direction of Matthew who was

hugging his knees in a corner of the room. Noticing Haro, who was happily freed but breathing very feebly, Yatori called out.

“Are you okay…? Sorry, I stopped him, but it was a little late.”

“Hahh, hah… J-just what did he do to me…?”

“It’s a bad habit of his. Even though he’s not that handsome, for the time being he likes to seduce girls. Left alone with the same pace as now, your breasts would then be massaged, and you taken to bed. Then when you finally notice something, it’d be chirping in the morning.”

“B-br…!? A-Awaah!?”

“Calm down, Haro. If you’re near me, you’re fine.”

While gently hugging Haro’s shoulders, Yatori, giving a sly smile, was exclaiming, “alright, I successfully won her over!” triumphantly in her mind. The Local-Acquisition-of-Allies Phase was commencing smoothly.

Suddenly, the cabin door slowly opened a second time.

The one who shyly showed his face was a handsome boy even taller than Haro. He had clear green eyes and hair tinged with a light green extending to his shoulders. In the pouch on his hip was the form of a wind spirit, the same as Matthew’s Tsuu.

“Umm, is it okay if I come in? Or not, if you’re in the middle of something.”

“Of course you can’t. Get back to your own territory, Ikemen[6].”

For some reason, Ikta immediately rejected him, but Yatori, sealing his mouth with one hand, welcomed the newcomer.

“Go ahead, come in. Well, everyone did self-introductions, so will you also join in?”

Readily accepting the invitation with a refreshing smile, the youth started his self-introduction as he entered the room.

“I’m Torway Remeon. I’m an 82nd Term graduate of the Imperial Ermi High Grade Academy. This little one is my partner, the wind spirit Safi. Somehow, please be kind to me, everyone. It’s a difficult Exam, but let’s try our best together until we succeed.”

The moment the youth gave that name, the upper body of Matthew, who was crouching in a corner of the room, rose energetically. At the same time, both of Yatori’s eyes opened wide. From some sort of silent agitation, her lips hung loosely.

“…I see. So you’re the Remeon’s…”

The third son of the Distinguished Remeon Family of the Classical Military Factions, on equal standing with the Igsems in the Empire. The strongest contender for success in the current term’s High Grade Military Officer Exam. Her biggest rival was in front of her eyes— with that understanding, Yatori took several deep breaths and calmed her heart, then, with an authority as if exchanging declarations of war, gave her name.

“I’m Yatorishino Igsem. This little one is my partner Shia…. I don’t need to talk about something like my personal history, right?”

“…Yatorishino!? Right, that fiery hair, the Igsem Family’s…! Ahh, my goodness!”

Just hearing his companion’s name, Torway brightened his eyes as if seeing an adored heroine. Even the mouth that until now functioned smoothly suddenly became clumsy, meaninglessly mumbling, “umm, that, uhh,” repeatedly. Looking at that condition of his, Yatori drew in her eyebrows doubtfully.

“…Wait, what? If there’s something you want to say, then say it clearly.”

“I-I can’t mentally prepare myself…. M-Miss Igsem, I—”

“You guys, are full of yourselves.”

The moment Torway steeled himself and tried to say something, Matthew broke in between him and Yatori. Gallantly confronting the two, the plump eldest son of the Tetdrich Family roughened his voice.

“The Igsems’ Close-Quarters Combat Tactic, naturally, and even the Remeons’ Line-of-Battle Firearm Combat Tactic aren’t cutting edge anymore. If you guys aren’t the forerunners of the battlegrounds anymore, then you aren’t the stars. I won’t unconditionally let you guys have big egos[7] just because you’re dependents of the Distinguished Families.”

“Umm, you are…?”

“I’m Matthew Tetdrich. Don’t forget this name, youngest of the Remeon Family.”

Matthew gave his name with a menacing look that practically declared war, but hearing that, Torway, in contrast to his companion, gave a charming smile.

“Remembering people’s names is my strong point. Let’s try our best together and succeed, Matthew-kun.”

“Hmph, Using false friendship to throw me off guard is useless, you know.”

“Matthew-kun… Matthew-kun, huh…. …Hm~m, can I call you Maa-kun?”

“Haa!?”

Given a nickname without any context, Matthew widened his eyes. Meanwhile, Yatori, who was interrupted in a conversation with her rival, sighed and pushed his body aside.

“…It’s natural that the Combat Tactics invented by our ancestors become old things as time passes. From the start, I had no intention in the least of hiding behind the glory of the past. In addition, if you let me say so, Matthew-”

Meaningfully leaving a beat, while intently watching her companion, Yatori finished speaking with a scornful laugh.

“Looking at things objectively, undeniably, in terms of size, your ego is the largest among us all[7].”

“W-wha!”

Precisely prodded at a physical characteristic which he was habitually self-conscious about, Matthew groaned with a miserable face. Charging in without bearing in mind the difference in rank would result in his defeat, that was a pattern evident from his time as a

student.

“Kuraa~, don’t bully Matthew.”

Ikta forced his way in as if reading in monotone from a script. Torway shook his head with an embarrassed face.

“I didn’t mean to bully him- if I ruined the mood, then I’m sorry. By the way, you…”

“Hmm, let there be silence. Two hunters[8] aren’t needed on one hunting ground.”

“E-eh?”

“Listen and be astonished, you have been handed down a guilty verdict in the face of judgement. The nature of the offense is precisely an attractive face and figure. According to the Scriptures of Alderah, death unto all ikemen!”[6]

“Your speech just now, that’s the stuff of an Inquisition! And at the minimum, have a back and forth in your conversations!”

When Yatori interrupted as the straight man[9], Torway sent her a look that asked, “an acquaintance?” She sighed and gave Ikta’s introduction.

“This guy is Ikta Solork. Like Matthew, he is in the same year as I am. Although he has a habit of threatening good-looking males for the time being, don’t mind it too much. He just has a strong sense of territory.”

“Ikemen should go explode! Grrr!”

Yatori explained grabbing the nape of the growling Ikta’s neck.

“…Is there a good relationship? Between you two. “

“We just spend a lot of time together.”

Yatori responded bluntly, but anyone’s eyes could see affection from her back and forth with Ikta. Torway returned his gaze to Ikta a second time, and, with an expression vaguely mixed with envy, slowly extended his right hand.

“I’m Torway, please take care of me, Ikta-kun…. That is, I wonder if you’ll be good friends with me?”

Stopping the threats, even Ikta intently watched his companion. Those pupils had the shrewdness to see into one’s interior. Whether or not Toway’s mild-mannered demeanor was a calculated thing— he had temporarily inferred from the back and forth until now, and for those results, he reached the conclusion that this one was a good person of the natural airhead variety.

“…I’m Ikta Solork. Repeating in my imagination the state of your face smashed apart so that it lost its structure about ten times, I was able to reach a tolerant mood. I’ll be friendly with you.”

It was just a slip of his refreshingly honest opinion, but it was nevertheless a condescending attitude. But, luckily, since Torway was a youth who wasn’t particular about minute details, a practically miraculous handshake was able to connect between the two.

“Mhmm, take care of me, Ikta-kun…. Ahh, that’s right, can I call you Ik-kun?

“No, I refuse. What the hell are you talking about?”

Although Torway was naturally eager to use a nickname despite it being their first meeting, continuing from Matthew, Ikta was Ikta, and he naturally gotten rid of that mercifulness.

“Really, Ik-kun, was it? Don’t be ridiculous, she is the only one who can call me that.”

Black eyes filled with meaning turned to Haro’s direction. He suddenly included a character that had been outside the mosquito net until now into the circle, and, in addition, even though she didn’t ask him, he gave her introduction.

“She is Haroma Bekkel. She is aiming to be a commander in the Medics, and she has five younger brothers at home. She’s a very good kid, you know. I guarantee it.”

“I-Ikta-san!? The flow of that introduction, it might lead to a big misunderstanding…!”

Haro was flustered and trying to make amends, but, unfortunately, Ikta hadn’t said anything wrong content-wise until now. Unaware of the circumstances, Torway exhibited the merits of guessing in the wrong direction.

“I see, so that’s how it is. Mhmm, you two, you really suit each other.”

“‘That’s’ how what is!? Noo, don’t look at me with such warm eyes…!”

Ikta, having twisted facts into a convenient form and thoroughly delighting in those results, unexpectedly had his foundation shaken violently. With the ship starting its engine and leaving the harbor, Yatori settled the area for the time being

“Since self-introductions are roughly finished, everyone, let’s settle down for now. Even if we are blessed by the wind, it’s a long trip close to two days until the Hirgano Archipelago. Concerning what happens after we’re dropped off on the other side, we should preserve our energy.”

“Ahh, that’s right. Then, shall we decide on each of our beds and collect our luggage?”

“Hey Haro, which position is good for you? Top? Bottom? Behind? Ahh, sitting face to face is good too, hehehe.”

“Why are you only asking me!? Also, are we really talking about bed positions!?”

“…Ego… my ego… is it that big…?[7] …mutter mutter…”

Then they each settled on their own beds, and weary from traveling until now, the five entered a light sleep. Incidentally, at the end of heated discussion, Ikta’s bed was assigned the farthest diagonally from Haro.

With the rocking of the ship growing violent due to a sudden deterioration of the weather three hours after they left port, Ikta and the others, all of them in the same cabin, began to open their eyes in turn. The long trip by boat, still in its opening stages. From anyone’s perspective, there was too much time remaining.

“U-ummm… 7—6 Bombing Troops… no, 3—3 Wind Gunning Troops.”

“Are you finished with that? Well then, for me let’s have 4—6 Air Gunning Troops with the merging of war forces and pieces from both sides.”

Sitting on a bed face to face, Matthew and Torway were waging war in military shogi. Both the one who brought the pieces and board and the one who proposed the contest was Matthew, but the war situation appeared to be unfavorable to him.

“3, 4, 5—7 Wind Gunning Troops Battalion. …Umm, with that, maybe four pawns are checkmated, right?”

“W-wait a minute! I still haven’t…”

Matthew was growing desperate and gazing intently at the board, but when he looked, his own army was increasingly at a disadvantage with every glance. He understood that the the outcome was already decided with the first minute and then devoted three minutes to mental preparation, and finally, he squeezed out the few words, “…I died.”

“Damn it, one more game! This one was just one foolish mistake after another!”

Even while saying that, the game record was already facing the reality of Matthew’s third consecutive defeat, but, hating to lose, he couldn’t readily acknowledge the difference in their ability. Torway, sensing that only an unproductive struggle would continue at this rate, felt worried about his companion and made a proposal.

“Hey Maa-kun, is it okay if we give our impressions of the match? The game just now, there’s a part I want to reflect on.”

Since Matthew also accepted based on reason that progress didn’t exist without calm reflection on defeat, he, though reluctantly, consented to Torway’s proposal. Seeing that they had pretty much come to a stand still, it seemed there was no room to lodge a complaint about the overly familiar way of address, “Maa-kun.”

“Uhh, even though I simulated until the mid-game…. Which was the deciding turn? Was it when I sent out too many Bombing Troops at the sixth turn, or when I lost the Medics at the 12th turn…?”

When Torway, taking care not to injure his companion’s pride, tried to state his opinion, a third person’s voice, even though it wasn’t even called for, came down from overhead.

“—It was the 21st turn, my buddy Matthew. It was when you let your Air Gunning Troops, whose merging of war forces was obstructed, uselessly be taken by the enemy line. There, you should have graciously retreated, and shifted to protect.”

Clicking his tongue at Ikta’s seemingly taunting voice, Matthew aligned the pieces with a loathsome expression. Torway widened his eyes and looked at the topmost bunk.

“Ik-kun, you remembered the course of the game? I wondered if you couldn’t see the board well from there.”

“I said not to call me Ik-kun, Ikemen. Next time, I’m hitting you with a pillow.”

His reply was blunt, but Torway honestly valued Ikta highly. That he remembered the course of the game was a considerable thing, but, it was the fact that he also grasped the offenses and defenses that deserved praise. The state of the game which Ikta considered to have separated victory from defeat was exactly the same part Torway was about to

mention.

“Everyone, I made tea~”

Luckily with that, Haro came back into the room together with Yatori carrying a large earthenware teapot and cups for the number of people. She first tried to pour it using the table that was installed, but due to the swaying of the foundation, the earthenware teapot seemed nearly about to fall, they switched over to the method of pouring while holding the cups one by one in their hands.

“It’s swaying considerably, isn’t it…? When we borrowed the galley, we were able to see the condition of the ocean surface a little, but the waves are definitely amazing.”

“Facing the strong effect of the west wind, it seems the course is deviating quite a lot to the east. Since we might be delayed with correcting the course, the boat trip seems like it will drag on longer than we thought. Really, a boat is a vehicle we have no control over.”

While taking a cup of tea from Haro, Yatori unsympathetically tied up her hair. Her gaze was casually turned to the military shogi board that Matthew and Torway held between them.

“What’s this, were you playing shogi? The result, how many consecutive defeats for Matthew?”

“W-why does the question take my consecutive defeats for granted…?”

“The lack of vigor in your objection means that that’s exactly what happened, doesn’t it? …Well, I don’t think it’s possible to care that much, though. It’s not like a shogi king equals a great commander anyway.”

Torway found and developed the beginning of a new topic in Yatori’s words, who had tried to sooth him just in case.

“Now that you mention it, regarding the interview in the final stage of this Exam, it seems you play a game of shogi with actively serving High Grade Military Officers. If one didn’t apply their ability in shogi against the ability of a commander like that, then what kind of meaning does this arrangement have- don’t you agree?”

“Since it’s an interview while playing a game, I think it’s something that can measure your ability to multitask[10]. Even if you become a High Grade Military Officer, if you can’t manage two or three tasks at the same time, you’ll become useless due to going over-capacity.”

Yatori’s answer was grounded in logic. Continuing, she looked at the figure of Ikta extending just his arm from the bed and accepting a cup of tea. While amazed at his laziness, she passed over the question from Torway.

“Ikta, what do you think?”

“..Nnn, it’s rather delicious. However, rather than tea leaves steeped with milk, I prefer separately warmed milk added to a somewhat strong tea brewed with boiling water- I wonder if that way of brewing is preferable.”

“Who asked for your opinion about the flavor of tea? Incidentally, the one who

recommended boiling the milk was me, you know. If by any chance it's spoiled, it's not that I can't say it's my fault."

For just having spent a lot of time together, Yatori was unusually smooth in dealing even with her friend's ridiculous banter. While raising just his upper body and sipping tea on the bed, Ikta carefreely answered the original question.

"I think that Yatori's reasoning was roughly accurate. Even excluding that point, it's because this, in its own way, is full of the basics of art of war. It's not bad as mental exercise. However, if I'm allowed to state my opinion— if soldiers play anyway, blindfolded shogi that doesn't use a board is better."

"—Huhh? Ik-kun, why— Wapu!"

The falling pillow landed a direct hit on Torway's face. Suddenly sticking his head out from the bed, Ikta yelled.

"Ik-kun forbidden! …If you apply shogi to war, namely, the board equals the battleground. I ask a question with that, though, when you're waging a war in reality, the commander look down on the entire battlefield from above the sky with the God's point of view?"

"…That's impossible. Regarding the locations of enemy forces, that's restricted information, so that's just about a situation where you can only make guesses. Concerning the allies under command, they aren't restricted to moving as planned."

"That's it. In real war, fighting starts when you grasp the positions of your allies and enemies. Necessary for that is the imaging ability to derive a whole image from fragmentary information. I won't say that blindfolded shogi can train that, but it can create a foundation for the power of imagination. First you hold the 'board' in your mind. Starting with that, imagine the soldiers moving on the board… Ah, is there more tea?"

While smoothly stating his point of view, Ikta was having his tea poured for him by Haro in a precarious position with his arm extended from the bed, as often was the case. Torway and Haro were listening admiringly on one side, and Matthew was largely ignoring him and scowling at the board, but with that, the ship swayed on a grand scale.

"Ah." "Ahhh—!?"

The tea that spilled from Ikta's cup landed a direct hit on Matthew's head with a devilish angle. While lightly apologizing with a "sorry, sorry," to his companion, who ended up turning a somersault from the heat, he suddenly shifted his gaze to the cabin door.

"There, who is that?"

Yatori called out looking in the same direction as Ikta.

She was distracted by Matthew's scream, but at the moment the boat swayed, the sound of something colliding with the door resounded. Yatori, thinking it was suspicious, walked over and opened the front door of the room.

"U-uhh…oww…"

She caught a petite young girl wearing a large hat on the opposite side of the open door. She couldn't see the face hidden by the wide brim, but the blond hair that flowed out, not fitting inside the hat, was smooth and beautiful. Her garments were also plain, but it was

obvious that the fabric was superior, and they were worn somewhat elegantly.

“A test-taker… it doesn’t seem that that’s the case. Where are you from, young lady? Do you need something from us?”

When Yatori smiled gently and asked her question, the young girl seemed at a loss for a reply and mumbled, “e-excuse me,” as a way to dodge and quickly leave down the hallway. Watching her leave, Yatori tilted her head.

“I wonder was that was? Well, at the very least, considering that an ordinary passenger just happened to be on a ship that’s boarding High Grade Military Officer cadets… Ikta, what do you think?”

“Nnn… Five~six years remain until she is suitable for consumption. Until she is perfectly ripened, perhaps it’s 15 years…”

“No one asked for the lower limit of your strike zone—”

The sudden assault of a severe vibration in the hull interrupted Yatori’s retort. Everyone simultaneously lost balance, and the contents of the cups they held in their hands spilled completely. Clearly differentiated from the swaying until now, that was the impact of a serious collision, not something caused by the waves.

“—What’s that!?”

While being the fastest of all of them in the same room to regain her balance, Yatori took an analysis of the situation. On the other hand, Torway was holding and propping up the shoulder of Haro, who fell face up, and Ikta, having fallen from the topmost bunk, crushed the elastically abundant body of Matthew and was shamelessly unharmed.

“O, Matthew, don’t tell me you saved me by bravely volunteering your body… Let us toast to our friendship.”

“Ughh… someone like you should’ve fallen headfirst…”

About when Matthew pushed Ikta aside and finally rose, the spirits that were sitting quietly on the beds also sensed a state of emergency and came alive, settling into their respective masters’ pouches. When everyone confirmed each other’s lack of injuries, a sailor’s yell resounded from the open door.

“P-passengers, keep calm and listen! The bilge of this ship struck a reef and has started flooding. Just now, an order for a complete abandonment of ship has been handed down from the ship’s captain! Those who can move, immediately go to the deck, and following the sailor’s instructions, and board the lifeboats!”

The voice instructing evacuation was shrill from the sense of impending crisis. Running aground, flooding, complete abandonment of ship— from these words, everyone in that situation simultaneously imagined a single, fatefully derived end, together with an image of hopelessness.

“Everyone, you heard that! We’re going to the deck!”

However, there was one person who brushed aside the pessimistic premonition in an instant and started moving. That was Yatori Igsem.

“There’s no need to rush, form one line behind me and follow! Luggage to a minimum!”

The one who could take control of the area without wavering in this situation was a human called Yatori. She had the leadership to establish order immediately in a group that was reduced to a disorderly crowd facing a state of emergency.

And, everyone besides her as well were not resigned to the disorderly crowd in this setting.

A baptism of torrential rain and furious wind welcomed them, as they ran up the stairs with Yatori as their leader and emerged onto the deck. The mast, whose thickness exceeded that of an adult’s waist, made creaking sounds with the wind pressure, and on top of that the sailors were working, risking their lives, to bring down the sails that were filled with wind and flapping wildly. Already the hull had sunk 20 times lower than normal, and, in addition, the time was early evening. The ocean surface, having just descended into darkness, was pitch black the whole time they were working.

“Stormy weather, is it…? A curse of bad weather in this situation, we’re people hated by God.”

“I wonder whose behavior was to blame. People with an idea try raising your hand.”

“Without even thinking you’re the only possibility, right? From now on let’s abstain from jokes with the Scriptures[11] as material.”

While striking a carefree banter with Ikta, Yatori, as the leader of the group, turned to the rear of the deck. There, four lifeboats had been readied, and the preparations were in order for one boat to launch from the sailors’ hand to the ocean surface. Instructions flew from the sailors to Yatori’s group who had come around.

“Help board from the people who came! You, the citizens, are maximum priority!”

Yatori, making a slightly surprised expression at undertone of ‘the citizens,’ quickly shook off the sentiment and resumed action. She had Haro board first, then Matthew, Torway, Ikta’s turn, then finally she herself entered the boat. When everyone’s bodies were settled into the boat, the sailors watching Ikta’s figure apologetically added something.

“Your partner is a light spirit, isn’t he? Listen up, because we ran aground, some injuries came up among the sailors, and right now we still can’t let sailors board this boat. Since the lifeboats are all moored to the mothership, they won’t drift away, but when it comes to it, the ropes need to be cut to send off your companions. At that time, please transmit your location to nearby boats with a light signal. Even when you’re more or less drifted off, gather together with no exceptions!”

After seeing Ikta and Kusu nod in unison, the sailor let out the mooring ropes and lowered the boat containing them onto the ocean surface. The small boat abandoned to the great stormy ocean, rocking violently left and right, didn’t allow the people it held to have the sensation that they were living.

“Th-this isn’t a joke you know! With an ocean this rough, to find shelter in any boat…!”

“Maa-kun, lean to the right a little more! Bekkel-san to the left! We’re making the balance of body weight uniform in the whole of the boat! With these waves, if we capsize once

then we won’t be able to recover anymore!”

The next to reach composure after Yatori, Torway sent out instructions, and Matthew and Haro, lost in shock, obeyed them. On the other hand, Ikta, in the middle of a pounding downpour, was motionlessly concentrating his eyes on the fatally sinking mothership.

“What’s the matter, Ikta? Strike your usual needless comments. When you’re quiet, there’s a bad energy.”

“I didn’t know you took my behavior as an omen. …More importantly, Yatori, it’s that girl.”

When Yatori, hearing that, followed Ikta’s line of sight, caught sight of the young girl they came across in front of their cabin a while ago. The girl was on the deck, trying to board a lifeboat. The trembling of her thin shoulders was perceptible even at a distance.

It didn’t seem the girl was at any age to travel alone, but she couldn’t see the figure of another companion.

“…Ah!?”

That moment, a tragedy occurred. The hull tilted violently, receiving a wide blow from the waves on its flank, and, with the momentum, the young girl that was standing on the edge of the deck was thrown toward the ocean. Airborne for an instant— without the time even to shriek, her small body was swallowed by the black ocean and disappeared.

One of the sailors who barely managed to stay on the deck, with a float tube in one hand, dispatched bloodshot eyes to the ocean surface.… But, too late. Even if he tried to send help, her form had been concealed in the valleys of the waves a long time ago.

“Mm, bad luck. That one’s going to die.”

Murmuring a reality exceedingly close to past tense, Ikta immediately stood up and began taking off his outer garments.

“Kusu. If you see that girl again, shine on her with a high beam[12] for me.”

“Ikta, that’s dangerous. You should stop…”

“I’m trusting you.”

Accepting his master’s petition, Kusu reluctantly slipped out of the hip pouch as they discussed and, standing on the pouch’s edge, fired a strong light from his abdomen’s ‘light cavity,’ beginning to illuminate one section of the ocean surface.

Continuing, Ikta grabbed a lifesaving float tube which was scattered around the bilge, and entrusted to Yatori the free end of the rope knotted to it.

“If you let go easily, I’ll come back for you as a ghost.”

“Wai- you—!?”

Without affording Yatori time to think, Ikta dove headfirst into the ocean. Undaunted by the raging waves and treading the water with his limbs, he advanced directly to the location shown by the high beam. There was nothing for everyone left on the boat to do but hold their breaths and watch his back attentively as he nearly slipped into the middle

of the pitch black ocean.

“…Bwahh!”

After ten-odd seconds, which felt like an eternity to the observers, Ikta rose to the surface, hugging the body of the young girl, which was as limp as a corpse. Yatori and the others breathed a great sigh of relief.

“It’s impossible, I’m dying! Save mee!”

Answering the shriek that slipped out in that time, the four simultaneously began to pull the rope. While sustaining balance in the middle of rocking capable of toppling them even now, only drawing two people up to the boat was difficult.

“Hahh, hahh… Ahh that was close… Seawater’s freakin’ salty…”

“Stop complaining, if you’re going to do something cool, then show off until the end…. Haro, how’s this girl’s condition?”

“She hasn’t drunk any seawater, and her breathing and pulse are normal. It seems she’s still in a state of shock, but…”

Laying her head down on Haro’s lap, the young girl was silent. At the moment, it seemed that her slightly opened eyes would recover the light of reason soon, but simply escaping without confronting things as they were, that might have been a fortunate thing.

“It appears that there she doesn’t have bruises or lacerations. …Hmm? This…”

In order to check for presence of injuries, Yatori, dividing the work with Haro and examining the girl’s body, had her attention captured by a ring fitted onto the the girl’s middle finger. It was a superior piece that also functioned as a seal, but rather than a mere expensive feel, the design plated in gold onto the silver base was too familiar.

“It’s no use, this one won’t hold anymore! I’m cutting the rope!”

That yell caused Yatori’s thinking to freeze. With the wave received in the flank seeming to have been a finishing blow, the mothership’s sinking already reached the recovery-impossible range. In accordance with their duty, the remaining sailors on top of the descending boat, executed the severance of the towing rope, which would become the job to last them a lifetime. The boat containing Ikta and the others had its connection to the mothership severed, and began to genuinely drift away.

“…Don’t tell me…. We were the only ones who were able to escape?”

Now, while tightly biting her lip and gazing at the form of the mothership, which was only waiting to be completely submersed, even Yatori, being who she was, had a haggard expression. In the background, Matthew was flailing his limbs and raising a piercing cry.

“Wh-what’re we gonna do? Thrown right in the middle of a stormy sea in a small boat, we’re going to die like this! “

Torway bound the panicking Matthew’s arms behind his back and held him down. On the other side, tightly hugging the body of the unconsciousness girl, Haro protested weakly with a whimper.

“W-we’re going to die, aren’t we? I-is there still anything—”

“…We’ll do what we can[13]. For now, we survive the storm.”

Yatori said it in a firm voice as if giving everyone instructions, herself included.

In agreement with that, Ikta, despite sniffling, took over her words.

“Ah-choo! …As Yatori said, from this point forward is the domain of chance. There’s nothing we can do until the storm is over. Slack off as much as possible, and after, let’s put God to work.”

Translator’s Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ written as: 酒精 (wine spirits/ethyl alcohol); read as: アルコール (alcohol)
2. Jump up↑ written as: 帝國　(Empire); read as: ウチ （we, us)
3. Jump up↑ text: 買いかぶりすぎ (overestimating -someone- too much); homonym: 貝かぶりすぎ (wearing too many clams -on one’s head-)
4. Jump up↑ proverb: 毒を以て毒を制する (fighting fire with fire)
5. Jump up↑ 176cm is approximately 5‘9
6. ↑ Jump up to:6.0 6.1 イケメン (ikemen) can refer to a man that is either good-looking or exceptionally ugly
7. ↑ Jump up to:7.0 7.1 7.2 idiom: でかい顔する (to act arrogant); text 7.0: でかい顔はさせない (not allow to act arrogant); text 7.1: 顔が体積的に一番大きい (uses different vocabulary from the idiom; literally: in terms of volume, your face is largest); text 7.2: …顔…おれの顔…そんなにでかいか… (uses same vocabulary as idiom; literally: …face…my face…is it that big?)
8. Jump up↑ written as: 猛禽 (birds of prey); read as: ハンター　(hunter)
9. Jump up↑ generally, the two members of a comedy duo are known as the straight man （突っ込み／ツッコミ） and the funny man　（惚け／呆け／ボケ）
10. Jump up↑ written as: 同時処理 (simultaneous processing); read as: マルチタスク　(multitask)
11. Jump up↑ text: 聖典 (Scriptures); homonym: 晴天 (good weather)
12. Jump up↑ written as: 凝集光　(concentrated gathered light); read as: ハイビーム　(high beam)
13. Jump up↑ text: 人事は尽くしている; proverb: 人事を尽くして天命をまつ (Man proposes, God disposes; Do your best and let the heavens do the rest; literally: devote yourself and wait for destiny)

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 1 - Chapter 2

All Quiet on the Eastern Front

File:Alderamin v01 071.png

Crackle, crackle—with the sound of sparks popping, the young girl opened her eyes.

It felt like she was being swallowed by cold, black, bottomless darkness.

There was no way to resist it. Being tossed about by the raging current with no sense of up or down, her eardrums screeching and shrieking with the pressure of the water- but more than that, the pressure of despair crushed her heart. Staring down the terror of death before your eyes for the first time since birth is not something you could possibly face with the power of reason.

The strength of her floundering arms and legs quickly exhausted. —As that happened, a light shone.

She could vaguely see that something was coming, traveling along a straight path[1] that pierced through the darkness. At first, her arm was grasped- from there, her body embraced. She could hear the sound of a heart extremely close by. She could only think that it seemed the two of their pulses, passing through their touching skin, were synchronizing.

Inside her fading consciousness, she could tell that Death was clicking his tongue and growing distant from her as she was wrapped in light and warmth—

“…Nnn…”

Crackle, crackle—with the sound of sparks popping, the young girl opened her eyes.

Her view was dark. With a small open fire as the sole light source, in the center of the orange light, human silhouettes emerged. A handsome young man anxiously gazing at the fire together with a plump youth whose teeth were chattering. As she turned even more, there was an imposing female with hair the same color as flames sitting on the left end. She was closely hugging her partner, a spirit, whom everyone was sharing to warm themselves.

“…Ah! Were you woken up?”

With a gentle voice close to her ear, she gradually noticed that she was being held upright. There was a feeling of soft breasts on her back, and warmth was being distributed from the skin in contact with hers across thin undergarments.

“…You, are…?”

At her voice, before anything the red-haired female—Yatori rose and immediately knelt reverently.

“You were able to awaken, Your Highness, the Princess. …Please allow me nothing but the privilege worshiping you like this.”

Except Haro, who was embracing the young girl, the others followed Yatori’s example and

lowered their heads. Being shown respect from them, the young girl as well remembered, once more, her own rightful position.

“…You, raise your heads. You may eliminate etiquette- Under what circumstances…”

“Ah, as you wish. …If I may explain concisely, during a boat trip headed to the venue for the High Grade Military Officer Exam, the Hirgano Archipelago, the boat which we happened to ride together encountered a storm and sunk. The only ones to narrowly escaped on lifeboat, were the six of us, including Your Highness. More importantly, after approximately two days of drifting, we drifted ashore a beach somewhere…thus, we are now living in an underground cave.”

Receiving Yatori’s report, the young girl widened her large eyes and sank into silence… after that, she took a full several minutes and organized her memories, making up for the gaps with the information she heard a moment ago.

“…I see, the ship… So that really wasn’t a dream?”

The unpleasant memory of being swallowed up by the pitch black ocean surface was brought back, and her shoulders suddenly trembled. Inside the layered outer garments she wore, Haro, embracing her small body, anxiously looked at her face from the side.

“During the two days of drifting, since the body of Your Highness, continuously struck by rain, became completely cold…this Haroma Bekkel and I, Yatorishino Igsem, had the honor of warming your body with our body warmth in turn. We were aware of our impoliteness, but for the lack of other methods, kindly pardon this much…”

“K-kindly pardon…!”

When Haro ashamedly lowered her head, the girl expressed a wry smile and shook her head.

“I am grateful from my heart for your kindness. With this one fragile body, I don’t doubt that I might have died of the cold before waking. …Incidentally, you. You just called yourself Yatorishino Igsem.”

“Ah…”

“It’s been a long time. I visited your home on the occasion of the Imperial visit of the reigning emperor, is that already a story from eight years ago?”

At the few words the girl spoke aimlessly, Yatori lifted her bowed head without thinking.

“…You remember it? At that time, Your Highness had just become four years of age…”

“Counting traditionally[2], you were 10 years old. You noticed me feeling irritated that my hand couldn’t reach a plate, and you took baked sweets from the table for me. Did you also similarly recognize my appearance?”

All the same, the girl herself knew that it might be an unjustifiable story. Yatori smiled vaguely and answered.

“Compared to that time, Your Highness has exceeded my imagination and grown splendidly, so… Your golden-colored hair and the Katjvanmaninik[3] engraved ring, if I had been negligent in some respect to even one of them, I wouldn’t have been able to be

certain.”

That said, the girl pulled her left hand from an opening in the outer garments she wore layered together with Haro. What she fitted onto it was a ring plated with a design of the Eternal Spirit Tree, which served as the symbol of the Katjvarna Empire.

“…Indeed. This person is the third Imperial Princess of the present Katjvarna Empire, Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.”

Except Yatori, who was half-convinced, the others appeared to realize that the existence in front of their eyes was nobility with a self-introduction from the mouth of the person herself. After a dignified silence, the one first of all to start the conversation was Torway.

“…I’m Torway Remeon. I meet you for the first time, Your Highness, Princess Chamille.”

“Umm, you’re the youngest of the Remeons. I’ve also heard rumors of you.”

“It is an honor. If it pleases you, if you would allow me just one inquiry…”

Without waiting for the end of Torway’s proposal, Her Highness, the Princess, began to answer in a firm tone.

“If it’s the reason that I happened to board the same ship as you did, I’ll answer without needing to be asked. In light of the worsening of the state of war with Kioka, as an extension of Imperial Family, I came to see the faces of the young people burdened with the future of this nation. It is also encouragement to the test-takers. It is nothing more or less than that.”

“But, any accompanying military officers or…?”

“Don’t finish your question. It’s obvious that they sunk to the bottom of the ocean together with the boat.”

Somehow, there was an obstinance in the tone of Her Highness, Chamille- who’d anticipated and answered the question- that didn’t allow him to challenge her. …But if there had been escorts, it was troubling that they didn’t see anyone near her both when they met on board and when she came onto the deck. Torway kept that doubt inside his chest for the moment.

“I-I’m called, Matthew Tetdrich. Your Highness, the Princess, a-also allow me, a few words, if…”

Though his well fleshed-out body, clung to tightly by a wet shirt, was trembling, Matthew timidly cut into conversation. The gaze of Her Highness, the Princess, turned to him.

“Tetdrich… That is a pedigree entrusted with the Stationing Unit of Ebdorch Island in the Southwestern part of the Empire. I learned your name as well. If there is something you’d like to ask, then do as you like, Matthew Tetdrich.”

Yatori, who was next to her, admired Her Highness, the Princess, who had fluently stated a summary of the Tetdrich Family, for her extensive knowledge. On the other side, starting to make his way over, Matthew himself, seemingly without the time to even notice that he’d met someone who knew his family name, faintly choked out a plea from his discolored, purple lips.

“I-if your body is s-sufficiently warmed, if you, would n-now r-r-return the outermost layer, you’re wearing, m-my coat…”

Hearing that, Her Highness, the Princess, then noticed for the first time that the outer garments of everyone in that area were lent for the purpose of warming herself. As one would expect, Haro, thinking that it was inexcusable, panickedly restrained the girl trying to slip out from inside the layered garments which substituted for blankets.

“Kya- y-you shouldn’t come out! Both the Princess and I are only in our underwear, you see!? Yatori-san, please return Matthew’s clothing to him!”

Nodding, Yatori retrieved the just the outermost mantle and returned it, well-dried, to its owner. Merely taking advantage of that, Matthew, wrapped in the middle of superior fabric and seeming to devote all his effort into not losing body heat, didn’t say anything since.

“Ah, the Princess’s clothing is also mostly dried… Then, I think that it’s a little difficult to do, but could we have you change clothing like this?”

“If it is your wish, then we don’t mind dismissing the males. Well, but there is a storm outside.”

At the image of Yatori speaking cruel things with a smile, Matthew’s body trembled violently for a reason other than the cold. Her Highness, the Princess, refused her proposition- which wasn’t good material for a joke- dismounted from Haro’s lap while wearing too much clothing with an unexpected promptness, and stood on the ground with her own legs for the first time in two days.

“Umm… I don’t feel unwell. I wonder if it’s because you warmed me.”

“That is above all, but now for a while, please be located near the fire. Under these conditions, if a cold or the like is caught by Your Highness, there’s nothing that can be done, even by us.”

Her Highness, the Princess, obediently complied with Yatori, who requested politely, but in a firm tone. Since sitting on the bare ground meant that her lower back would grow cold, she sat back down Haro’s lap in the end.

They surrounded the open fire in silence for a while, but Her Highness, the Princess, suddenly opened her mouth with a face as if she had been struck by lightning.

“…That’s right. I wonder if, the time the ship sunk, the person who rescued me when I was thrown out to the ocean is among us? There’s no mistaking that you all are the benefactors of my life, but I particularly want to express my thanks to that person. Come forward.”

“…. Please wait a moment.”

Rising, Yatori slipped out of their circle around the open fire and walked into the pitch dark depths of the cave. As a replacement for her disappearing figure, the sound of a limp, heavy object being kicked echoed across accompanied by a scream.

“Wake up, Ikta. It’s a call from Her Highness, the Princess.”

“…Have her reschedule. For me to meet with a party without an appointment… oof.”

The same sound and a yell echoed back three times. As for whether the ordeal was finally over, a youth with a hand affixed to his hip like an old man worrying over lower back pain, naked above the waist and wearing a light spirit in a pouch, revealed his form.

“…I’m Ikta Solork. Thanks, Your Highness, the Princess- in a good mood?”

“How- so there was another person? Then, you’re the one…?”

“Well, it was the spur of the moment, or should I say, I was the right person at the right time…. Since I was the only light spirit holder…”

Dressing up formally with a shirt handed to him by Haro, Ikta, in a dreadfully inappropriate gesture, bowed to Her Highness, Chamille. Although in actuality, that was just him being kicked from behind by Yatori.

“I see. In any case, I give my thanks, Ikta Solork. In addition, to your partner, light spirit-dono as well. After I’ve safely returned to the capital, I’ll arrange for due compensation regarding your brave deeds.”

Kusu raised his head from inside the pouch. However, Ikta was sitting cross-legged at the moment.

“Then, it’s best if you can return safely, isn’t it…somehow…”

“Ikta. Stop speaking in a way that meaninglessly agitates anxiety.”

Yatori advised in a low voice. However, it was after their companion’s anxiety was already agitated.

“…It’s possible that return can’t be realized, you mean?”

“For us- who don’t know where this place is- quite so. It was fortunate that we were able to drift ashore while still alive, but even so we were carried away for a full two days in the middle of a storm. …although on the way, I saw the sun come out in the upper right front side of boat’s course, so I just know that we were carried to the northeast.”

Ikta’s tone was trivial, but there was no aspect in contents that was glossed over with optimism. When Her Highness, the Princess, sunk into silence, Torway stood up to change the atmosphere, which had become considerably heavier.

“It seems the sound of rain has grown weaker. We also need to confirm the present location, and if that means going to observe outside, then perhaps we should go now. — Ik-kun, if you like, shall we go together?”

“That nickname, you really don’t learn…”

Even while grumbling, Ikta stood up with surprising obedience. With each of their spirits stored in their hip pouches- after Torway took up his own bag in addition to that- the two lined up and left the cave.

The time appeared to be early morning since the sky was already bright, and the pounding storm had weakened to the degree of a light drizzle. Brushing aside thickets, Ikta and Torway pushed their way through a trail-less forested region that spread along the beach. During that, they had some slight conversation.

“Thank you for coming with me. To be honest, I wondered if Ik-kun wouldn’t think this was too much trouble.”

“Since Matthew was in that state of health, and the girls were needed for the Princess’s protection, the lineup was decided by the process of elimination, right? I slack off when I need to slack off, but at times when if I slack off I’ll die, I’ll work.”

It was a twisted argument, but Torway never disliked that character of Ikta’s.

“So, about Her Highness, the Princess… Ik-kun, what do you think?”

“Even if there are suspicious points, I think that it’s best not to make any strange investigations. At best, you’ll get trapped in a bad situation.”

“Aw, right to the core of things. When you talk with me, you won’t return with humor?”

“I deliberately flip a switch. Even if I’m the funny man here, Yatori[4]isn’t with me… ah, I found something good.”

Ikta, finding a fruit-like object hanging from poison ivy, plucked it and threw it over to Torway. While biting into his own share, he explained.

“It’s the insect trap of the pitcher plant. When it ripens and becomes used for attracting insects, it’s not good anymore, but if it’s before the mouth has opened, the fluid inside can be used for drinking. It’s surprisingly sweet, so give it a try.”

“…Ah, it really is. It’s tart and delicious.”

“Put some in your sack for me. It’ll tide us over until we find real food.”

Unable to put anything in their mouths outside the water created by Haro’s water spirit, everyone in the cave was being tormented by hunger. Torway merrily took down the sack from his back, plucked the insect traps within reach, and began stuffing.

“But, you and Matthew both are people I look up to. Since, even when the ship we boarded sank, you carried those heavy things out with such great care.”

What Ikta meant was the iron, gun-like thing inside Torway’s sack that conspicuously asserted its existence. The firing of leaden balls with the pressure from using a pump such as that installed onto the “wind tunnel” in abdomen of his partner, a wind spirit, was the main weapon of modern-day soldiers— so to speak, it was an air shooter barrel.

“Haha. I considered it a little, but I thought that thinking about whether or not it’d be a burden and throwing it away could wait until after we boarded the lifeboat. Since, for me, an applicant to the Air Gunner Division, it’s the most important thing next to the lives and partners[5] of my allies.”

“Although it would be nice if we didn’t run into circumstances where that’d serve a purpose. At any rate, ahh I’m hungry…”

Throwing away the insect traps that had their contents sipped dry, Ikta and Torway hurried ahead while listening to the chorus of the insects inside. While looking at a compass so they could move forward in a straight line and not lose their way, they emerged to a grassland that interrupted the forested region in about 15 minutes.

“…We’re screwed.”

As his field of vision suddenly cleared, Ikta surveyed the area and thus complained as the first thing out of his mouth. Coming a little later, Torway, upon witnessing the same sight as he did, was at a loss for words.

There was nothing surprising regarding the terrain. Extending considerably from east to west, an open field with a few undulations sprawled out uninterrupted. However, on the ground on the west side which they were supposed to follow back— in addition to a natural mountain range and hills, ‘’something else’’ stood as a further obstacle.

“…There’s no way…. I mean, that’s the west side…no matter how much we were carried off, this…!”

Even Torway, who had boasted a composure rivaling Yatori’s until now, couldn’t suppress the trembling of his voice this time. Displayed in his view were barbed wire entanglements running perpendicular to the shoreline that divided the open field in two, and within them, separated by fixed distances and dotting the area one by one, turrets meant for watch-keeping. From the closest one, he could even see the figures of actual soldiers coming in and out.

“…Somehow, it doesn’t seem like a delusion. The ‘’eastern’’ border of the Katjvarna Empire looks like it’s on the ‘’western side’’ from here. Meaning, basically…”

In any case, as to not be found by the guard soldiers, the two hid their bodies in the shadows of the trees. —First three clicks of his tongue. Then he huffed out a single sigh, generously blended with resignation until he was satisfied, and-

“This place is already territory of the Kioka Republic… it’s regrettable, but it looks like we’ve descended into hell but for a paper-thin difference.”

Ikta Solork described a reality similar to his own personal nightmare with quite a simple metaphor.

Due to the report spilled from the mouths of Ikta and Torway once they returned, the atmosphere of inside the cave, far from becoming lighter, instead welcomed an increase in pressure to one similar to lead.

“…That… to think we were carried off to the other side of the national border.”

Haro murmured with a paled face. Matthew, who just finally warmed his body, also let out a scream.

“Dammit…How can it be like this? Just when I thought we made it through…”

Regardless whether that was good or bad, Matthew’s words spoke for everyone’s true feelings. Even the great Yatori was silent as if there was a need to rethink her words of encouragement. Before that, Ikta acknowledged the circumstances.

“Because it turned out like this, the options that we can actively select are limited. So before anything, concerning that point, I think it’s wise for us all to establish a common goal.”

Without waiting for a response, Ikta raised his right and left index fingers and held them

up so they could be seen by everyone.

“The first, surrender to the Kioka Army and request reception as prisoners of war. Well, if anything it’s relatively reliable.”

A heavy silence filled the cramped space. There was not one person among them attracted to that option.

“The second, cross the national border and return to the Empire with our own power. This one’s quite the gamble, no?”

Talk was cheap. When they considered the difficulties of putting it to action, no one could easily give their support.

After having a not-brief pause for consideration, appearing to be speaking timidly, Matthew opened his mouth.

“I-if we become prisoners of war, with the wartime treaty, our safety is guaranteed. Of course, we might be confined, but if we wait for a while, wouldn’t we be able to return to the Empire via a prisoner exchange…?”

Rather than a view grounded in reality, it was a wishful observation. Yatori shot it down completely.

“Still, that’s too optimistic, isn’t it? I think that even people without self-awareness are among us, but for the moment we are High Grade Military Officer cadets bearing the future of the Imperial Army, right? Just that is reason enough on Kioka’s side to not want to send us back… even if you leave out that point- and this something including myself- among us, there are too many people who can serve as material for diplomatic exchange.”

“That’s true, isn’t it? Not even mentioning Her Highness the Princess, there’s Yatori-san, a descendent of the Igsem Family, and me, a descendant of the Remeon Family… under any circumstances, high prices would be set for us three as prisoners. Say for now that we are able to return, how much compensation will be required?”

“Goodness, people with high prices on their lives really suck, don’t they? We can’t even secure our self-interests how we want to.”

Not one person had the composure to respond to the cynical remark which Ikta had uttered with a stunned expression.

“Well, that’s it in a nutshell, my buddy Matthew. Even if we become prisoners of war in this place, we won’t be returned that easily to our country[6], and say we were returned, then quite the cost would be wrung out for us. And you should imagine the narrowness of our shoulders among other things once we’ve return to our country. …Well, in addition, the situation if we choose this option[7], we can only hope that the people of Kioka won’t find the Tetdrich Family’s fame as hot information, right?”

Even reaching this point, there was no escaping the harshness of the sarcasm from Ikta’s words. Matthew held his face and agonized, but, the next moment, a roar sounded across the cave as if to drive off those worries.

“Prisoners of war and the like— this isn’t a joke!”

Her Highness, Princess Chamille, doing well to vigorously stand up, shouted with a look menacing enough to shake the flame of the open fire. Even as astonished gazes gathered on her, she still didn't loosen her tone.

"There is no time to be stranded in a place like this! I- I must return as quickly as possible! Forget guard soldiers- cross the border using any means necessary! You, listen, in the event of our success, whatever reward- mmph!?"

At that moment, impolite to the extreme, two fingers pressed directly down on the lips of the tirading princess. While the other actors were dumbfounded, Ikta was looking down on the nobility in front of his eyes with a horribly cold expression.

"Quiet down a little, Princess. No matter how much you rant and dangle an extravagant reward in front of our noses, there's no making the impossible possible. That degree of reason is something I'd like you to learn from history. That is, from our[8] history of repeating the same things to a sickening degree."

"–H-how…!"

Having called him the benefactor of her life, the princess overlooked his shameless rudeness until now, but still, she was at a loss for words with this contempt. Since it escalated higher than she could handle, she didn't know what to say back right away. In the end, there wasn't a need for her to say anything. Since Yatori broke in between them, twisted Ikta's arm up, and pulled his body to the ground without warning.

"—Your Highness, this thing has committed a grievous irreverence. Upon my word, he won't speak such profanity a second time, so this time if you could somehow be merciful. In light of this thing's service at the time of the ship sinking."

Though she used enough strength to make his bones creak and his joints produce an unpleasant grinding sound, Yatori begged forgiveness in an unstrained voice. At her terrifying power, the princess forgot her fury and only shook her head vertically.

"I-t's fine…. Certainly, it seems that I lacked composure…"

Ikta, having received forgiveness, was finally released from her defense technique. He stood without groaning once, but he was holding his twisted shoulder and seemed to be enduring considerable pain.

"You've reflected, haven't you? Once you've given thanks for Her Highness's generosity, go cool your head outside a bit."

"Roger that."

Leaving behind a reply which didn't suggest that he'd reflected at all, Ikta left the cave together with Kusu. When his figure disappeared outside, Yatori turned to everyone remaining and made a single proposition.

"Whatever choice we make, there's no point if no one has normal powers of judgment. It's impossible to try to have a constructive discussion while hungry. For now, how about prioritizing our immediate survival and gathering food?"

"…Yep, I approve. If we can fill our stomachs, surely a good plan will come to mind."

Following Torway, Haro and Matthew also agreed one by one. The last remaining, Her Highness, Princess Chamille, with the fiery haired girl's intense eyes in front of her, had no other choice but to nod.

Chased out of the cave, Ikta began a food supply to satisfy his hunger without even being prompted by someone else. He appeared twisted on the surface, but, fundamentally, he was only moving according to the three main desires, and his behavioral principles were simple.

"Hm~m, cohune palm nuts sure are hard to harvest without a tool…"

Palm trees laden heavily with nuts were standing here and there, but he let them be for now and looked at the ground. When he concentrated his eyes intently, inside the damp brushwood, the living creatures of the forest, having greeted the morning, were moving around.

"Ah, he~y snake-san over there, quietly become meat for my plate, would you?… wha, you're long! S-s-s-so you were a python-sama? No, that- sorry, it was nothing."

Watched intently by prey of an unexpected size, Ikta withdrew dejectedly. Ikta didn't possess the nerve to grapple with a three meter class serpent. Wearing a snake around one's neck among other things wasn't considered very fashionable.

"In times like this, maybe I should follow Mother Nature's heartless principles, and aim for weak things rather than big game. …Oh, I found a grasshopper. Al~right, if I fry and eat this one, it'll smell pretty good…"

"This is only fine for us, however. Insect eating is low-class cuisine, so Her Highness, the Princess, will definitely reject it."

As he continued chasing grasshoppers around on all fours, the voice of his friend, who not long ago mercilessly wrenched his shoulder to its limit, rang out from behind. Ikta continued his acquisition without turning around, but Yatori continued speaking regardless.

"That affair earlier wasn't very like you. Even if he spits out sarcasm as easily as breathing, the one who'd never make it serious would be Ikta Solork, right?"

"Rather than being flawlessly consistent, it's more charming for a character to be agitated once in a while."

"Even if that's the case, we can't have your true character exposed here, can we? Show yourself taking a solid, composed action during a pressing state of emergency. There isn't another appeal as effective as that, you know."

Strangely, the exchange of words with Yatori in the lead stopped there. There, with a bundle of grasshoppers in one hand and his back turned to his companion, Ikta began to speak emphatically.

"Even like this, I'm reflecting, you see. I had the background knowledge that she was nobility, but I didn't think that being flustered by someone in front of me would make me feel so aggravated."

“That’s what I thought. …So you can’t forgive a person of the ruling class behaving unintellectually?”

“Even though I was supposed to have given up a long time ago. Nothing would happen even if I didn’t allow it.”

Ikta gave a self-deprecating sigh. Yatori opened her mouth after choosing her words a little.

“…This is a slightly irreverent way of saying it, but the behavior of Her Highness, Chamille- before suggesting whether the Imperial Family is this way or that- is appropriate for her age. No, just not bursting in tears with these circumstances is a sufficiently considerable thing, don’t you think?”

“Right, that’s it. For someone like me, just saying that I spoke with royalty is the best two-thirds of me. —Ah, by the way, if you have a knife, lend it to me?”

When Ikta skillfully turned around while crouching, Yatori, who was standing there, had unnoticedly armed herself with equipment without her clothing being disheveled in the slightest. She wore a saber on her right hip and on her left hip, a main gauche.

This was the two-handed swordsmanship stance that became the reason for the “Igsem of the Blade, Remeon of the Bullet” fame rivalry. As the air shooter was to Torway, this to her was the next precious thing to her life- the object of her pride.

“If you nick the blade, I’ll kill you.”

Even so, Yatori extremely easily removed the main gauche that was half of that pride from her hip and granted it to Ikta. Of course, she wouldn’t allow that just anyone. However, concerning the strength of their relationship of mutual trust, there were parts that somehow exceeded the understanding of other people.

“So everyone’s assembled. Well then, please report each of your harvests.”

When the sun that was above the horizon had risen directly overhead, all six people assembled in front of the cave and contributed the results of their search for food. Flora and fauna of delectable color and form were lined up on the grass.

“Umm, since I wasn’t very good at chasing prey that moved around, I tried gathering while focused on fruit and mushroom species. For mushrooms, with the Boletales supply as my focus, I gathered large, filling ones, but fruits were more of a problem, and…. At first, I thought that I might find bananas or papayas, but in actuality these were the only things I could harvest.”

What Haro, saying that with a bit of a wry smile, was pointing at were fruits resembling orange bell peppers. There was easily enough for the number of people, and the vibrant, warmly-colored rind did indeed seem delicious. Her Highness, the Princess, having an interest, picked one up from the middle and looked at it.

“What kind of fruit is this? I haven’t seen it before…”

“Ahh, Caju, right? Well, rather than being inedible, isn’t it a hundred times more preferable? It’s precious carbohydrate after all.”

Everyone excluding the princess shared a forced smile. On her clueless behalf, Haro added an explanation.

“Princess, you’ve eaten cashew nuts before right? Those are a part of this fruit’s seed.”

“Oh, cashew nuts? If that’s the case, you seem to have an expectation for the taste?”

Not saying much, Haro only suggested, “Have a bite.”

As told, the princess, putting the orange fruit into her mouth, creased her brow and stiffened the moment her teeth bit into the surface. Her mouth regained freedom with about 30 seconds after apparently quite some difficulty biting through.

“How is it, Princess?”

”…It’s hard…puckery…grassy…. …And, somewhat sweet…”

Despite being simple, the impressions hit the mark. Feeling for the first time that the atmosphere of the area relaxed even slightly, though the mood had yet to change completely, Torway took over.

“With that, I think it’s my turn next. Simple preparation in addition to good flavor, the coconut crab. Although I could only catch two since it’s the afternoon.”

Two enormous, bundled creatures resembling hermit crabs were laid out side by side on the grass. Voices of admiration spontaneously rose for them. Coconuts crabs hid in burrows in the ground during the afternoon. To be able to catch them, it was necessary to find the entrance to the burrow and dig them out, but that wasn’t an easy task.

“…The middle of the day, moreover in this short time, two specimens of this size? You’re not half-bad…”

Yatori was watching Torway with burning eyes, but the person himself, embarrassed at being watched by Yatori, averted his eyes and repeatedly scratched his face. They were two people on completely different wavelengths.

“With that, I’m next. …It was a close fight, but I plan to take responsibility as the one who suggested this.”

Giving that introduction with a broad grin, Yatori walked off to a nearby bush and came back dragging her own prey out from there, which she’d hidden aiming for a surprise.

Shouts of joy rose immediately.

“Ehhh!? I-is that a wild boar…!? No way, how did you with just one person…!”

“One stroke of a sword at the nape of its neck… if you look, that’s the only wound. That being said, did you really use that sword…!?”

Yatori, having gathered looks of awe to herself, threw her chest out with pride. For her, who had been in a class of her own from the start, when she received those two things, admiration and respect, the more she received, the greater her priceless reward was.

“…Next is me, isn’t it, as I expected…”

At a glance, Matthew was in low spirits. Looking at the harvest he brought in, it was no wonder.

“Although I’d like to proceed that way… What is this? Three smallish palm nuts- that’s fine, but the rind is broken and the juice inside all but leaked outside, isn’t it? I’m curious what kind of harvesting method you used that it ended up like this.”

“…. When I tried to harvest palm nuts, they were in a higher place than I thought. Since they didn’t fall when I threw rocks, I thought I’d rather try to shoot them down…”

His partner, the wind spirit Tsuu, turned to Matthew from his hip pouch with anxious eyes. Even though no one said anything, his eyes and the air shooter barrel worn on his back his told the entire story of his failure.

“…My buddy Matthew, every tool has has its uses. You can’t fire your gun to reach a solution for everything, you see. That kind of random shooting spree, without mincing words it’s something third world countries do.”

“Y-you’re the last person I wanna hear that from! Aren’t you worse off than I am?”

Quite the dangerous joke slipped out of Ikta’s mouth, but before anyone noticed, Matthew’s shout changed the conversation’s target. Cold stares were concentrating on Ikta’s harvest which was piled in a mountain his feet.

“…Cicadas, grasshoppers, long-horned beetles, water scavenger beetles, giant water bugs, every kind of caterpillar…. How should I put it, that, it’s an extremely wild line-up, isn’t it…”

“W-well insects were the most convenient source of protein. Don’t you think so?”

“And frogs…? You considered preservation and dried it- well, can I give you an evaluation?”

Although Ikta received a very delicate evaluation, the person himself whistled without eating. Her Highness, the Princess, looking at the food he gathered, lost some color in her face and timidly asked a question.

“Y-you, eat this…? That is, how should I say it, are they really insects…?”

“Of course I eat it. This is my personal opinion, but giant water bugs are so disgusting I could die.”

“Hey- that’s where you should smooth things over! …Your Highness, the Princess, please relax. Since even if you don’t touch the insects, there is flexibility in the food we have.”

Her Highness, the Princess, breathed a sigh of relief. Putting the ingredients they scraped up in front of her, Haro got fired up and rolled up her sleeves.

“With that, shall we immediately prepare some food? Even if I say that, although since we don’t have a pot, we can only basically fry it. If we use things like leaves and clay cleverly, I wonder if we can manage something like steaming in a covered pot…?”

“Putting aside the part we could eat now, I’d like to smoke the boar meat, but sending up conspicuous amounts of smoke isn’t the best. Matthew, Torway, can have your partners suck in the smoke?”

When the cooking began under Haro and Yatori’s leadership, nice smells immediately began to drift around the cave.

The performance of Haro, who'd been entrusted with the cooking, was surprisingly good, and when the sun began go down, they were able to take a late lunch. With the sensation that they were being restored to life, the six people stuffed their cheeks with their first decent meal in roughly two days.

"The meat is delicious~ You didn't even add any seasonings, but when I bite through, strong flavor comes out…"

"The steamed mushrooms and coconut crab are pretty good too. If I have any complaints, there isn't enough salt."

"If you boil sea water, you can get it easily, but if we go out to the shore, there really is too much of an unobstructed view. It'll be bad if we're found by Kioka soldiers watching from the national border, so I guess we'll make do with the taste of the raw materials here."

Surrounding all sorts of menu items which were placed on leaves and lined up on the ground, they continued a harmonious dinner within their limitations. When some time passed, Matthew, who suddenly regained energy with food in front of him, began revealing his positive view on their failures until now.

"I've been thinking the whole time, you see, since we have two air shooters here, isn't it possible to even cross the national border depending on how we do it? Since somewhere on the long border, there has to be a place where their guard is understaffed."

"When your stomach is full, you sure become cocky, don't you? However, just listening to Ikta's story- perhaps Kioka is focusing their course of advance to the side of the Empire in this area- their defense seems quite strong. Even if we walk along the national border to a place where their surveillance becomes thin, I think the odds are 10 to 1 that we'll be discovered enroute."

Matthew, having received Yatori's relentless criticisms, folded his arms and hummed. Next to him, Ikta inserted a remark while tossing grilled grasshoppers into his mouth.

"We can't take crossing the national border lightly. A chance of success is born only after there is an assistant to both this side and the other side of the line. We don't have that person. Although preferably if we can bribe a soldier it'll probably be quick, but as for goods that might turn into money among these members' belongings…"

Ikta's eyes were turned to the hand of Her Highness, the Princess, picking at the coconut crab meat- to be exact to the small ring fitted onto it. Speaking of straightforward valuables, that fit the bill, but still it was too much.

"…It might be a stretch to try and bribe the Republic's soldiers with a ring openly engraved with the Imperial Family crest. If that's the case, it's still realistic to sell Yatori's two blades. The craftsmanship is plain, but that, it's quite a sharp blade right?"

"Oh, what an expert eye. Who was it I wonder who was allowed to prepare a frog with that sharp blade?"

"It was you used it to bring down a wild boar, no? A blade is a swordsman's life."

It was Ikta's hypocritical excuse, but at any rate, there was no change in that it was insufficient as bribery material.

With the topic about to be paused since everyone was thinking, Her Highness, the Princess, who had been silent until now, opened her mouth for the first time.

“…Whether we’ll cross the national border on our own, or content ourselves as prisoners of war. Everyone has been contributing wisdom for a while, and when a plan where we can expect an adequate chance of success emerges, or if possibly nothing emerges, I want the decision made properly. …The reality is that nothing changes no matter how much shout. I trust your judgment power and effectiveness.”

Hearing her speech, the other actors stared at the princess with surprised expressions. Ikta’s abusive words became a point of regret for himself who had spoken them, but they seemed to have also prompted the side that heard them to some reflection. In any case, that she was moved a small degree from the discussion was a desirable thing. Since, from a genuine standpoint, no matter what kind of unreasonable demand was spoken by Her Highness, the Princess, the others had to obey.

“…As Her Highness said, there’s no need to rush the decision, right? We can’t be leisurely about it, but let’s thoroughly take time to decide. Since we can’t be easily found here, and the difficulty of survival isn’t that high in this environment. I think it’s fine if we have take one or two days as thinking time.”

Everyone agreed to Yatori’s words and established a lengthy grace period for the present.

When lunch ended in the middle of an atmosphere which was quiet in its own way. Everyone, having recovered their energy and stamina, was outdoors each spending time on work for securing and maintaining their living space. But—since that was the case, because she had neither survival knowledge nor experience, one person emerged twiddling her thumbs.

“—Yatori, what is that used for?”

While idly coming and going in and out of the cave, Her Highness, Princess Chamille talked to her scene partner who continued her manual labor in silence. Not stopping her hands which proceeded with their work, Yatori turned just her face toward her scene partner. Her partner, the fire spirit Shia, also sent an indifferent gaze from her hip pouch.

“Yes, Your Highness. I’m making a simple alarm device that uses nuts and string. If we lay this around our surroundings, when someone comes close, the nuts of the tree hanging down near the entrance of the cave will make noises and alert us.

Yatori’s answer was crisp and fluent, already just like a soldier’s. When the princess tried to say, “is there something I can help with,” she had already finished her work and promptly stood up vigorously.

“Then, I’ll install the finished product and come back. I apologize for forcing your inconvenience, but please don’t go out further than the range visible from the cave.”

When she confirmed that her companion nodded, Yatori jauntily turned her body around and disappeared into the trees. Her Highness, the Princess, having once more lost her place, drew closer nearby Haro, the sole remaining person of the same gender.

“Haro, what are you doing?”

“Ah, Princess. Umm, now I’m making medicinal plants that are effective for swelling into a paste. If you are cautious about injuries, you can avoid them, but you can’t do that as much for insects bites.”

On top of a stone with a sunken center that she must have chosen on her own as a substitute for a container, Haro was grinding leaves, roots, and the like. Her partner, the water spirit Miru, was standing on the stone’s edge, and occasionally poured water from the “water spout” on his torso, helped Haro make smooth paste.

“Is there something, that I can also help with?”

“Huh? No, no, that’s- to borrow your hands, Princess! Please go on resting!”

“I-I see.”

Compelled by Haro’s intensity, who was rapidly shaking her head horizontally, Her Highness, the Princess, with neither knowledge nor experience at hand, withdrew unable to say anything. Something that even I can do— while thinking that, she shifted her gaze to another place.

“Oi, Torway. That air shooter, isn’t the barrel a little too long?”

“Umm… It’s because I want to aim accurately as far as possible, and I can’t no matter what with something shorter than this. Although if I were a hunting soldier, who’d have to shoot while charging, then Maa-kun , as you say a shorter one might be better.”

Tsuu and Safi, the two wind spirits, while sucking in smoke, were sending out fresh air and controlling the open fire. Around there, Matthew and Torway were holding their air shooters in their hands.

“…Mmm.”

Even here, she didn’t feel that she could easily force her way in. After hesitating and hesitating, she reluctantly chose Ikta Solork, who was sitting slightly removed from the cave’s entrance,

“…Solork. If you’re doing something, is there something I can also help with?”

Her calling of only this person by his family name and not his first name expressed her complex mental state. But then, the person who was called, without an indication that he sensed it, continued his manual labor without looking aside.

“Nn, you’ll lend me a hand? I’m weaving these vines like this.”

When she looked into his hands, he knitting sturdy vines together and making some sort of woven object. Concluding it might an animal snare or something, Her Highness, the Princess, learned by imitation and took part in the work.

“Right, right, like that. There isn’t really a need to make it pretty.”

“I see, understood.”

It was her first experience making something with her own hands, but once she understood the trick, the task wasn’t that hard. While moving her hands on the object in silence without any conversation, the princess repeatedly stole glances at Ikta’s face.

He is an oblivious male, she thought at first. Considering those rash remarks from earlier, and that he let me help with the work normally, I wonder if he doesn't differentiate between social statuses at all.

"Your hands stopped moving."

Finally, the directness of even giving that reminder. The princess, unembarrassed, eagerly wove the vines. After about 10 minutes, their whole-hearted work came to fruition, and the thing the two of them were making was finished.

"…Solork, what is this? It doesn't seem like it's wide enough for a net."

"It is an essential item necessary to a human lifestyle, much more so than a net. Will you try using it?"

Saying that and standing up, Ikta cleared a suitable space, chose two standing trees, and stretched the woven vines between them like a spiderweb. Looking at the readied object, he nodded with satisfaction.

"It's pretty good craftsmanship. —Well, go on."

"'Go on'… you say, but-"

Being urged on was fine, but this was comparable to a situation where nothing could be done since Her Highness, the Princess didn't know what the thing was used for at all. As she stood still with a confused face, Ikta took the initiative and went out before her.

"Put your hips in a little. You use it like this, see."

He agilely placed his hips on the vines, and using them as a pivot point to rotate his body, turned sideways with his body swinging between the trees.

Watching that figure, Her Highness, the Princess, finally enlightened about what it was used for, thought of the time and labor that was spent and hung her shoulders.

"…A bed, right?"

"It's something called a navy purveyor, that is to say, a hammock[9]. When you get used to it, it's quite comfortable."

File:Alderamin v01 101.png

Ikta clapped his hands for the princess who somehow succeeded in lying down.

He spoke while skillfully climbing off using movements reversed from when he got on. Ikta recommended the,-as he put it- "essential item necessary to a human lifestyle" to Her Highness, the Princess, a second time. The princess was a princess, and- drifting toward the idea that she wanted to take back at least the cost of her help- timidly placed her hips on the hammock.

"Right, right, now as if straightening your body with your hips as an axis— Oh, wow, you were able to get on without a problem, weren't you?"

Ikta clapped his hands for the princess who somehow succeeded in lying down. She was made to feel ridiculous, but experiencing a hammock's snugness for the first, she didn't have the time to say something about it.

“Although, beginners usually overturn once when getting on. Your highness is pretty talented.”

“Were you hoping that I would overturn just now…? H-however this doesn’t suit me. Rather, I’m afraid it might fall. I can’t believe there are actually people who can sleep on this.”

“Don’t be so nervous, please relax your strength in the most stable position. Rather than laying out leaves on the bare earth and sleeping, I think you know that this is much more comfortable.”

She adjusted her body position, and at the end of her troubles, when she found a position that couldn’t possibly unstable, the princess made up her mind and dismissed the strength from her body. For a moment, she that that she might overturn, but the makeshift hammock was unexpectedly taking her her body weight securely.

When she overcame the first hurdle, the composure to simply enjoy the circumstances was finally born in the princess. First of all, her perspective- that itself was fresh. The well-bred princess hadn’t had the experience of lying down outdoors until now.

The pleasant sound of leaves rustled in her ear, and the blueness of the sky peeking through the gaps in the green ceiling was beautiful. Due to the good ventilation of her back, she didn’t mind the heat that much. After falling into a dark ocean and opening her eyes to a dark cave, this felt like somewhere in her ever stiffened heart, something was coming unraveled.

“…I see, this isn’t bad. I feel at ease.”

“Right? The beginning of a single perfect day is only from a comfortable bed.”

The princess was thinking that it was amusing how Ikta puffed out his chest, but, suddenly, something cut across the piece of blue sky she was looking up at. Initially, she wondered if it was a bird, but the movements were too slow for that.

“…Solork. The strange thing floating on the sky, do you know what that is?”

Charged with that question, Ikta searched up at the sky, but the instant the same thing arrived in his line of sight, his expression immediately became grim. From there, his right arm firmly pushed his body weight on one side of the hammock.

“—Wha!?”

As he kept watch, Ikta’s arm cleanly caught the body of the princess, who was on the verge of overturning and falling. Neglecting the dazed girl, he turned his heels and hastily began walking.

“They are Kiokan Aerial Warfare soldiers. One aircraft flying without setting a formation means that its mission is either reconnaissance or patrolling. Whichever it is, if it’s in a position that we can see from here, then there’s the fear that we’ll be found by them as well. It’s too bad especially since it seemed that you were understanding the joys of a hammock, but we’re holing up in the cave for a while.”

Giving her approval after the fact, the princess was carried off nearly without consent. She just surrendered to that audacity, but when she was being carried by not particularly strong

arms, a memory was unintentionally brought back.

From inside his arms, Her Highness, Chamille, quietly peeked at Ikta's face. Then, she remembered—that she had her first encounter with this man inside the cold ocean, within the single beam of light that shredded the despair and darkness.

Faced with the existence of the Aerial Warfare soldiers, everyone hid inside the cave as a cautionary measure, but before long the blimp hid its form inside a low cloud, and at approximately the same time, sunset arrived. However, for a while after that, the reality that they were "being watched from the sky" proved to be a great pressure, and the number of words they spoke became few.

Dead of night that same day. Inside the cave echoing with their individual, unconscious breathing, Her Highness, the Princess, opened her eyes.

In addition, it was not because Matthew's snoring was loud. Her sleep wasn't disturbed to that extent. Despite that being the case, waking up was the result of a more severe, pressing circumstance.

Fortunately, it seemed that everyone including the spirits was sleeping well. The princess stealthily went out alone.

"…If I'm here, then I should be fine."

When she came to a grove of trees fairly removed from the cave, the princess, anxiously looking around, reviewed the area and, after hesitating quite a bit, lowered her underpants along with her shorts. Since she met the experience of relieving herself outdoors once in her life during the afternoon, this was only her second time. She didn't want to become even this accustomed to it over an eternity.

"…Whew…"

Taking time and finishing urinating, Her Highness, the Princess, took a handkerchief from the pocket of her coat and used it to wipe. Ordinarily, this would be when she'd throw it away, but now, it was her single precious sheet. She would need to wash it with water and dry it.

She raised her underpants while feeling miserable, and when she thought to stand up, then —.

"—There, who's there!?"

The rustling sound of someone pushing through brushwood, and next the hoarse, echoing voice, made time stand still for the princess.

Going slightly back in time. The noise of rattling when hard fruits collide woke four of the five inside the cave who were lying in the depths of slumber, excluding Matthew.

"—Everyone, please wake up! Something crossed our trip wire!"

"…Whaa!?"

Yatori's voice, perfectly suppressed as to not echo outside, along with rousing Matthew, stirred vigilance in the already awoken actors. A moment later, a lamp that dimly radiated

light burned inside the cave. A white light different from a flame— It was a lantern from the light spirit Kusu, whom Ikta had been hugging as he slept.

"…Wh-what? The Princess…?"

Haro frantically rubbed her sleepy eyes and looked around the area, but the figure of Her Highness, Chamille, wasn't anywhere. The moment they realized that fact, Yatori, Ikta, Torway- those three stood up nearly simultaneously.

"…Yatori, Torway, two seconds. Ready your weapons."

Even before that was said by Ikta, two swords were worn on Yatori's hip, and Torway was finished installing his air shooter barrel the torso of his partner, the wind spirit Safi. Kusu and Shia also stored their bodies in their respective pouches.

"We can go anytime. —But Ik-kun, you're going unarmed?"

"It's the forest at night. There's no weapon superior to a light spirit, and if there's no light your air shooter's useless."

"When I looked, the one that moved was the second sensor from the left. Our opponent is straight on our left when we leave the cave."

Haro and Matthew, in contrast with the three who were exchanging knowing looks, weren't keeping up with the change in their situation. However, among Yatori's group, the people from which one could expect a proper performance during an emergency, no one urged on the remaining two people after figured out their objective.

"Matthew, Haro. If we don't come back, please choose to become prisoners of war without hesitation."

Taking Yatori's short and severe words as a signal, the three went off running outside the cave.

She'd been found by the enemy. The instant she understood the reality, Her Highness, the Princess, couldn't make any kind of reaction. While making the dry sound of stepping on dead branch, she knew that the presence was rapidly coming closer. Rough footsteps and breathing overlapped and began to be audible. He wasn't alone. Was it two, or three, or more— the princess, in a state of half-panic, didn't know what to do with her thoughts, which were spinning uselessly as if to make up for her unmoving body.

"Quickly raise both your hands and come out! We have a gun, if there is strange behavior, we'll shoot you on the spot!"

The noun gun, the verb shoot- she remembered for a second time the image of death carved out in stormy sea. Even though she had to escape quickly, when that happened, her body listened less and less to what she was saying. While facing her ruin, this time as well as before, holding her breath and crouching down was the best she could do, but—

"S-stop, don't shoot! I'm coming out now…!"

A panicked shriek rose from the shadows of a tree other than the area where Her Highness, the Princess, was crouching. Her firmly shut eyes opened widely. That was undeniably Ikta Solork's voice.

“Over there! Don’t make any more movements, we’ll confirm your location from here.”

Following that voice, a dazzling light ran through the center of the dark forest. The enemies, seeming to have a light spirit holder as well, used a high beam and started probing the source of the voice. Before long, a black haired youth was illuminated inside the white light.

“Your speech, that’s a dialect from the Empire, isn’t it? Who the hell are you?! Why are you here!?”

“I-I escaped the Empire and came here! Since the war won’t ever end, and my house was burned up by Aerial Warfare soldiers, I’m really fed up with that Empire! I mean, the Republic’s looking pretty good, ain’t it!? Take me with you as an ally…!”

Every single word of Ikta’s lines implied desperation, and even to Her Highness, the Princess, who was listening nearby, it didn’t seem to be an act. He was clinging merely to hope and fleeing here, just a refugee begging for his life.

“…I thought that’s what it was, another refugee, huh.”

“Ahh, that’s right! On the night of the storm the day before yesterday, I crossed the border by sea! Rolled up in the waves, I thought I was going to die, but like finally, I barely made it!”

“What about your allies? You came here alone!?”

“My mom is with me! She’s sleeping the cave in the place straight in front of here! She’s not doin’ so hot ‘cause she kept on being hit by the rain. I mean, you guys are Kioka Army soldiers, right!? Help us out!”

While squinting his eyes in the radiance of the high beam, Ikta continued his words with a desperate expression. His fervent speech seeming to have born results, the men, wearing deep green military uniforms with their air shooters readied, slowly approached him.

“We understand the circumstances, lead us the cave. You can relax. The Republic universally accepts refugees.”

“…You’re going to help us? T-thanks, it’s this way! It ain’t that far— Ah, ow!”

Ikta, turning his body with a face as if meeting the Buddha in hell- possibly having a bad experience with a tree root- stumbled forcefully. When he hastily tried to get back up, this time he gave a scream and ending up crouching.

“Hss, I twisted my ankle…. S-soldier, sorry, but won’t you lend me a shoulder…?!”

“You’re a troublesome guy, aren’t you. …Hey, Nihad. You help too. Also Irik, we don’t need the high beam anymore, so come here with a lantern.”

One soldier holding an air shooter already came and took Ikta’s hand. Furthermore from behind, the man with the light spirit walked over while changing the light emitted from the “light cavity” into a gentle lantern.

“I-is this all of you guys? My mom can’t walk on her own, and even for carrying her, the help…”

“We’re the only ones who come here. But, if she’s not a very plump madame, we should

be fine.”

“…I see. ‘’So it’s only you guys’’?”

Ikta, mumbling quietly, innocently stretched both his arms. Doing that, he tightly grasped, one each in his left and right palms, the air shooter barrels of the soldiers whose hands he borrowed to stand up.

“…Wha!? What are you doing?! Let go of my hand—”

“Pattern 3! Destroy them, Yatori, Torway!”

Just when Ikta shouted facing the darkness of the background, the modest yet piercing sound of firing air shooter echoed. A soldier, the light spirit holder, the flesh of his face grazed by a lead bullet, held his cheek and raised a scream.

“…gh, missing by that much…!”

The voice of Torway reverberated, manic with irritation. An extremely effective first strike was completely wasted. The Kioka army soldiers, sensing that they had fallen for a trap, immediately began recovering their stance.

“Irik, are you alright!? Stop the light immediately and fall back! There are air shooter holders among the other group as well, we’ll be targets like this!

While kicking at Ikta, who seized the guns, as if tearing him off, the middle aged soldier who appeared to be the leader yelled in a loud voice. It was the correct judgment given the situation, but that was why it was possible for Ikta to predict it.

“…Kusu, Searchlight…!”

Withstanding the pain of being kicked, despite stubbornly clinging to the barrels, Ikta also sent out instructions. Kusu, previously on standby in a tree with good perspective, received them and emitted a high beam from his torso. The wounded soldier who tried to extinguish the light and slip into the darkness was illuminated a second time in the middle of the darkness.

“B-bright… gah!”

The fourth shot Torway fired pierced under the hands he held up trying to block the light. The bullet penetrated his eyeball and reached his brain, and their pitiable foe sunk into an eternal sleep from which he wouldn’t wake again.

“—Irik!? Damn, I won’t let you get away, you bastard!”

A full-bodied kick heavy with anger thrust Ikta aside and knocked his body to the ground.

“Die, Imperial scum!”

The mouths of two guns, hungry for a meal, were pointed at Ikta who’d exposed his defenselessness. However, the instant the triggers were about to be mercilessly pulled— a red shadow racing through the brushwood danced around the backs of the two Kioka soldiers.

“—The wind-!”

Trails of silver cleaved the darkness. A saber on the right cut down the neck of the first,

and with a flowing sequence of movements, a main gauche on the left stabbed the back of the second. Living up to the fame of the “Igsem of the Blade”, from the time she approached until Yatori brought down the enemy, not two seconds had passed.

The two bodies collapsed with a thud at roughly the same time. However, they couldn’t be careless yet. Facing right and left, while turning the tips of her saber and main gauche toward both necks, Yatori gave a warning.

“Don’t move, spirits! If you resist, your masters die!”

Despite fumbling with their long air shooter barrels, the strings of escaped wind spirits trying hard to stand up on the other side stopped at her words. …All spirits acted with the lives of the humans with whom they made an agreement as their top priority. Taking their partners hostage was an effective way of rendering spirits powerless.

“Ikta, you’re alright? —Torway! Take the spirits of the opponents I brought down with you!”

Nodding at Yatori’s instructions, Torway cautiously approached the side of the fallen soldiers. The corpses were lying face down. The figure of the remaining light spirit, shaking his master’s body with small hands, was heartbreaking.

“…Spirit, your master has already-”

Died- Torway couldn’t utter that word at the moment. It wasn’t impossible. Until now he had been able to lose himself in entering the battlefield, but for him and his allies, this was their first time in actual combat.

The instant one experiences the reality of “I killed someone” varies depending on the person. In Torway’s case, that wasn’t when the one he killed was in front of him, but rather, he experienced it strongly when he “saw the figures of those remaining”.

“Torway, leave that luxury for later. It’s not over yet.”

Ikta’s callous advice snatched the time to bask in sentimentality away from the soldier in his first fight. Torway firmly stifled the emotions welling from the depths of his heart, and, taking up in his arms the spirits standing motionless in the wake of their masters’ deaths, returned in the direction of his allies.

“Nnn, the one whose neck you cut is dead. Seems like the only one who’s still breathing is the one whose back you stabbed.”

Sitting near the collapsed enemy, Ikta confirmed the deaths of their scene partners. The usual easy-going youth wasn’t there. From the moment the alarm sounded, he was- more than anyone- composed, and cruel.

“Sorry, I didn’t have the time to think about capturing them alive…”

Yatori, who had personally cut them down, had the belief that they were fatal wounds. Ikta also assumed that and nodded.

“There’s nothing we can do. Well his mouth at least should be functioning.”

Saying that, he turned the body of the enemy soldier face up. The stab wound missed the heart, appearing to have somehow punctured the lungs, and the enemy soldier’s breathing

was whistling and shaky. At any rate, it was clear from the amount of blood loss that there wasn't much of his life remaining, but Ikta, in addition to knowing that, began talking to him.

"Hey, you can hear me, right? Your name is? Ahh, actually never mind your name. You have a name tag."

Ikta's hand stretched and removed the sheet copper hanging from the soldier's neck. Confirming that he was being watched by his companion's eyes, which were losing their light, continued further.

"Member of the Seventh Independent Battalion of the Republic Army, Private Nihad Hyu of Aerial Warfare. You're a rather unlucky new recruit."

"…S-save me…"

"We'll give you medical care. However, that's after you've answered our questions. If you don't speak clearly, we're leaving you and going back."

Ikta dangled a superficial hope in front of his eyes, but the dying soldier had no choice but to cling to it. Considering that his remaining life was ticking away, the questions started.

"Question One— Where is your base? Approximately how far is the location?"

"…T-to the east, half a day with a blimp…"

"Alright, that's good. Question Two— For what mission, and how many forces were mobilized? Your reason for landing here?"

"…Mission, patrolling the inside of the border… forces… forces, not united…. Squads of three per group, came here on blimps…. Landing here, a cave good for camping…hack, hack."

In the middle of his answer, Private Nihad spit out a cough mixed with blood. While expressionlessly wiping a drop of blood that caught on his face, Ikta continued the questioning.

"I see, so it was to pass the night above ground. Well then, Question Three— where is the blimp you came on?"

"…, …"

"I can't hear you. The medical care will be too late, answer properly."

"…Leave, the forest, straight along the beach…. It's cold… please… please stop the blood…"

"Got it, next is the last question. —Nihad Hyu. Have you been to the border?"

Mustering his strength and turning his neck left and right, Nihad coughed violently and spit out blood a second time. With that at it's peak, his breathing rapidly weakened… within the passing of a minute, the rising and falling motion of his chest disappeared completely.

Murmuring a short, "good work," to the young man who couldn't answer anything anymore, Ikta stood up.

“Ahh, you can come out now, Princess. Everyone’s dead.”

At that dispassionate voice, Her Highness, hiding in the trees, froze her body. There was something that rejected outsiders in the atmosphere around Ikta at the moment.

Noticing Her Highness, the Princess, was frightened, Yatori went to receive the girl on her own in the course of her own assumptions.

“Your Highness, it’s Yatori. Please come here. Ahh, thank goodness, you were unharmed.”

Her shoulder propped up by Yatori, the princess finally stood up properly. As the two returned together, Ikta, gathering the spirits who lost their masters in one place, turned to them and made a proposal.

“It’s too bad, but your partners- they all died. I’m sure there are those among you who want to report their deaths back to their unit or something. But, we can’t allow that. Because we’re going to stay alive.”

Neither a negotiation nor a persuasion, that was a kind of formality. When only the enemy spirits who’d lost their masters remained on the battlefield, concerning their treatment, that was decided by the Scriptures of Alderah, which preached friendship between humans and spirits.

“I swear on the name of Alderamin, Supreme God of the heavens, that we will reincarnate you in the Church of the Empire, and thereafter promise you appropriate treatment as prisoners of war. —Therefore, please entrust them to us, your souls.

A while after granting audience to Ikta’s words, as they made a sound like hard objects being rubbed together, the three spirits fell over facedown. From the napes of their necks, one section of black slate measuring several centimeters flew out. It was called a “soul stone,” the source of a spirit’s will.

“…Thank you. They are in our care.”

When he handed them to his allies after collecting and picking them up with his fingers, Ikta crouched in there and took on his shoulder Nihad’s corpse, still left with the warmth from his lifetime. At his action, Torway revealed his confusion.

“Huh, you’re carrying the dead body…? If they don’t have any more allies, then if we hide the body in the brushwood…”

“We’re safe for the time being. Torway, you can bask in the sentimentality of your first fight as much as you want now.”

A strong voice interrupted his sound reasoning. While advancing his heavy stride step by step, Ikta spoke as if he was struggling.

“Therefore, allow that luxury to me as well. —This guy spoke clearly, didn’t he?”

No one was there who had the privilege to advance a different opinion.

After everything, with about two round trips, the remains of the Kioka soldiers were carried to the vicinity of the cave without a single one left behind. Matthew and Haro, greeting the four who returned, breathed a sigh of relief before anything. After that, Matthew went outside together with Ikta, and Haro was assigned to look after Her

Highness, the Princess, who was in a slight state of shock.

Currently inside the cave, there remained two groups: Haro and Her Highness, the Princess, and Yatori and Torway. Torway was looking at his own air shooter before the open fire, with an expression as depressed as that of the princess.

“…To miss, by that much…”

He failed to bring down the enemy with the first shot, and as a result he appeared to feel guilty for having exposed Ikta to those dangerous eyes. On the opposite side across the open fire, while holding her sword in her hand, Yatori cut into the conversation.

“A moving enemy is completely different from targets during training. If you brought him down with four shots, then that’s a good performance for your first fight.”

“But, the enemy was nearly stationary…”

“I’m saying, anyone would be nervous in in that situation. It’s normal that one couldn’t produce even half of their true ability.”

“That’s no more than an excuse. Just now, Yatori-san and Ik-kun were composed and devoted your very best.”

Yatori huffily stood up and held the face of Torway, who was stuck in a loop of self-condemnation, with both hands.

“Don’t get too full of yourself, Torway Remeon. Don’t value yourself over something like being able to do the same things as me and Ikta. The talents people have are completely different things depending on the individual. Concerning strength of performance, I pride myself in losing to no one. Being imitated easily would be unbearable.”

Torway widened his eyes and looked at her, but at the same time he couldn’t help but notice. That Yatori’s palms, touching his cheeks, were cold, and that they were trembling slightly even now.

That was right. Today, for the first time in her life, she also stole the life of a stranger with those hands.

“What’s important, is that you reliably perform the tasks that you’re able to. As air shooter holders, you and Matthew are valuable assets at the moment. Since the worst bullet, even if it doesn’t hit, can make your opponent cautious. This time, since you made the enemy extinguish his light with that, wasn’t I able to approach relatively safely?”

Hearing that, Torway took on a slightly comforted expression. Yatori huffed and pulled back.

“…You ought to learn little from watching Ikta. He may be carefree, but that guy always knows the things he can and can’t do, and acts accordingly. This time, since he couldn’t become an immediate asset, he undertook the dangerous role of decoy, and the other wretched role. Would you have been able to complete that interrogation on a dying human?”

Torway dropped his gaze and kept silent. He remembered the figures of the bewildered spirits near the dead bodies..

“You wouldn’t have, right? But, you’re fine like that. For now, at least. That is to say, your role in this party is to be a kind, gentlemanly older brother. You shouldn’t feel obliged to do more. Ikta sees himself and stands in that position.”

“…Yatori-san, you understand Ikta rather well, don’t you.”

Yatoiri shrugged her shoulders and ambiguously answered, “who knows,” to the young man gazing at her with conflicted expression.

Her Highness, Chamille, apparently having recovered her composure somehow as the result of Haro’s comforting, talked to Yatori, who seemed to just be finishing holding her sword, in a stiffened voice.

“Yatori, may I also see the corpses of the Kioka soldiers?”

“…That’s- my apologies, but-”

Yatori hesitated slightly, but seeing the princess’s tormented expression, the words, “I don’t think you should,” drew back inside her throat. Binding to her belt her two swords stored in their sheaths, she took the hand of Her Highness, the Princess, and went outside the cave.

Three corpses were lined up beneath a noticeably large dipterocarp tree. Their military uniforms and tags were stripped off, leaving only their undergarments. Suggesting that they would be useful later on, the one who stripped all they had from the unsuspecting dead was also Ikta. Her Highness, the Princess, couldn’t understand this simple idea.

“…I heard that Solork outwitted them by pretending to be a refugee from the Empire.”

“Ha…”

“What kind of reaction did the Kioka soldiers have? Were they rough, or were they courteous?”

When Yatori considered Her Highness, the Princess’s mental state, she couldn’t answer easily. However, in the end, she injure the honor of the dead by lying.

“…I think, that they were courteous. It seemed they- no, the current Republic itself is proactive in regards to accepting refugees. If the Republic warmly receives escaped Imperial citizens, the people from the Eastern Province who abandon their country and flee will increase higher and higher, and that is linked with the effect of the reduction in the Empire’s power.”

“Our opponents who stretched out a hand to accept us, we killed them with a sneak attack…”

Yatori could see that she was slightly uncomfortable. …Was she feeling guilty about killing the soldiers of the neighboring state with which they were at war in with unfair methods? Not that she didn’t understand, but wasn’t the Imperial Family’s wording strange?… At the least, as the official stance of the nation, every war conducted should be founded in the name of justice. And even though Her Highness, Chamille was a member of the Imperial Family, in other words, a chief figure which assumed the name of that justice-

“That is the truth. However, Your Highness, your words-”

The princess shook her head and interrupted Yatori, who opened her mouth to defend her own and her allies' honor.

"Everyone says it, I understand. —This is my responsibility. The one who ordered you to, 'send me safely back to the Empire,' was none other than myself. How could I criticize you?"

While staring intently at the dead bodies of the Kioka soldiers, Her Highness, the Princess, was unconsciously gnawing the center of her index finger. The words that could be overheard from her mouth were no longer directed towards anyone.

"…Three people died here. As long as we go on like this, more people will continue to die. Both friends and enemies… The nation that is supposed to exist to support people's lives, why does its Imperial Family continue to idly damage lives in this way as well…?"

Her soliloquy continued endlessly. Even though the teeth gnawing her finger had broken through skin, the person herself didn't notice.

"Forgive me… please forgive me…, I must return home alive…. In order to precede the moment the large tree decays and collapses by even one second, I must do anything to return…. Even if my punishment is Hell, somehow…. Even if my limbs are torn off, or my intestines dragged out… even if I'm lined up with the reigning emperor and crucified, so…"

Blood trickled down from the skin of her finger. The color of her eyes was clearly unusual. Although the princess continued to mumble as if she were delirious, Yatori, aware that she was her attendant, hesitated to-

"—Calm yourself, Princess. A luxury such as self-mutilation is one that ought to be enjoyed once you've returned home safely."

Fortunately, Ikta, having come back, crossed that line in her stead. The princess, her arm grabbed by the youth and possibly startled by the sudden contact, entered a state of panic and flailed her arms and legs.

"Let go, let go, Solork…! Who said it was fine to touch me…?!"

"Excuse me for not earning something like your approval. More importantly, look, blo~od is coming out, blood. Your hand is completely red, isn't it? Do you understand that this red fluid is literally a drop of your life in that condition you're in?"

"Blood, blood, you say?! I don't care. This annoying substance ought to leak out without a single drop remaining! You don't understand by seeing it? ''It's rotten, this is rotten!'' My blood- the Katjvanmaninik bloodline- was corrupted a long time ago!"

While struggling even more violently, Her Highness, the Princess, shouted incomprehensible things. Ikta watched over her condition with a serious face, but before long, as he breathed a light sigh, he forcibly pulled the princess's arm toward himself, and without saying a word pressed his lips onto the wound on her finger.

"—Wha!?"

Even Her Highness, the Princess, stopped struggling and froze. Ikta roughly sucked the fluid flowing from her wounded index finger with his mouth until the bleeding lessened,

then releasing his lips as if nothing happened.

“I don’t sense it by seeing it, nor by tasting it. …Princess, the stuff called blood is continually created and replaced inside the body, you see. It won’t become rotten as long as it’s inside living creatures. Therefore, whether it’s annoying or whatever, your way of saying it was unscientific.”

“…Un…scienti…?”

“It’s a neologism by the intellectuals. In short, it’s a bothersome and unreasonable way of thinking that’s largely useless. You don’t need want nor adhere to it; you ought to think more simply and see the true nature of everything. —For the time being, you want to return to the Empire, don’t you?”

At the question, the princess returned a reflective nod. Ikta lifted his lips in a smile.

“If that’s the case, you should only think about staying alive. When you distribute energy to unnecessary things, your troubles just increase. Besides, Princess— you may have forgotten, but when the ship sunk, I myself was struggling to save you. …This is nothing in the realm of hardships. But if it becomes a strain and I’m unhappy, I will feel only hatred on the day it becomes a wasted effort.”

Ikta’s hands held her small right hand between them. The same warmth as before reached the princess across their skin.

“So please treat your life with care. Even a small wound is connected to a major disease like tetanus, you know.”

“…Solork. So you didn’t hate me…?”

“Nope, I don’t think anything in regards to Your Highness personally. About one thing recently… well, it was something like a childish burst of anger. If it’s not too late now, I apologize. That was inexcusable.”

Quickly bowing his face deeply, Ikta released the princess’s hand, and said, “I’ll come back with Haro,” as he returned to the cave. While watching his back with a dazed face, the princess looked at the index finger of her right hand, conscious of the feeling of the dried lips that were held there for a brief time.

“…Yatori. Ikta Solork, in the end, what kind of man is he…?”

At the question of Her Highness, Chamille, Yatori, after thinking for a long time, answered clearly despite making a sarcastic laugh.

“He is a twisted man. …However, Your Highness- you can’t build a house with only straight sticks.”

After Her Highness, Chamille, and Yatori return to the cave. With the sound of shoes treading on moist earth echoing in the darkness, Ikta unexpectedly wandered back in front of the dead bodies quietly laying down.

“—Sorry about this. Even as far as offerings go, this is all I have.”

Saying that, he lined up smoked boar meat and caju flesh in front of the corpses. When that was over, he had Kusu turn on a Lantern near the resting Kioka soldiers and went

around looking at each of their tags.

“Private Nihad Hyu of Aerial Warfare, Private Irik Bahuzah of Aerial Warfare, Sergeant Hadiakka Ogholee. I’ll be sure to remember your names. …Nnn, I guess Irik was relatively handsome. That wasn’t nice of us.”

Staring at his face, which had been unrecognizably destroyed by a bullet, Ikta gave a light sigh. While staring at the profile of his face, Kusu inserted some words.

“It was a justified act of self-defense. Ikta, please don’t be disheartened.”

“Thanks, Kusu. Of course it was a justified action. Maybe, for them as well.”

For a long time after that, Ikta was quiet, gazing at the corpses. Since they knew that they, without saving the souls of the dead, were only comforting their own hearts.

Before long, the night sky began growing light, and Ikta, not speaking a word the whole time, turned his heel and returned to the cave. In the end, he couldn’t come out with the words of eulogy he had been mulling over the whole time from the beginning to end.

On the next day, which he greeted while sleep-deprived, Ikta brought all of his allies to the beach along the center of the tropical forest. After they walked for nearly an hour, when they were sweating under their clothes, they finally reached their targeted location.

“That’s it. If we’re here, we can’t be seen from the border, and even if we go out onto the sand, I don’t think there’s a problem. Urged on by Ikta, they left from inside the forest and went under the sun for first time in a while, widening their eyes at the large silhouette that was there.

A dome[10] inflated into a bulging sphere, and a small basket meant for installed under it meant for a crew. The shape they saw from up close was much larger than it was rumored to be, and, if things didn’t go well, it would look more like a monster than a mode of transportation.

“Waah- so this is a blimp…?”

Haro, her eyes sparkling with curiosity, quickly drew closer.

Ikta gave a warning to Yatori, Torway, and Matthew, the three people chasing after her.

“Hey, there’s a ban on fire near the blimp. Shia ought to know, so I think it’s fine, but make sure you don’t raise sparks by striking your swords or air shooters together.”

They didn appear to understand the reason for the “ban on fire”, but in any case, becoming cautious, they stopped halfway to the blimp. Peering into the basket, Haro tilted her head at what was inside.

“Is that a fire spirit? That one and the three others whose souls fell out…”

“Ahh. When we came for a preliminary inspection before dawn, since it was blimp-sitting, we disconnected its soul stone and made it into our prisoner. We were nervous because we thought its human partner might be nearby, but it didn’t seem that was possibly given what Ikta said…”

“Aside from the crew and this spirit, three more fire spirits are required for one blimp, my buddy Matthew.”

There were some who turned a surprised look toward Ikta, who gave a plausible explanation, and others, a doubtful one.

“The way you said that, Ik-kun, do you possibly know the mechanics of a blimp…?”

“Amazing- where did you learn that!? It’s certainly not made with the Church of Alderah’s — ah-”

Remembering that Her Highness, the Princess, was right nearby, Haro panicked and shut her mouth. The person herself made a display of shaking her head with an innocent face.

“I’m not a priest, and it’s currently a time of emergency concerning all of our lives. As long as you don’t go too far, you may disregard the principles of the Church of Alderah. If need be, please devote your very best.”

“Even Her Highness is saying this, so, Ikta, don’t hold back and tell us. …In the first place, how does something like a blimp float in the sky? Is it because it’s inflated and bulging with air? If that’s it, then don’t frogs or pufferfish also seem like they could fly?”

When Matthew argued his naive speculations, Ikta nodded sleepily while scratching his head.

“If you’re set on that I have no choice then- I’ll explain the mechanics simply. …Answer this first, my buddy Matthew. Have you ever gone swimming in the ocean?”

“Sure I have. I’m not bad with movement either.”

“I know, being able to move relatively quickly considering your physique is one of your strong points. Now that we’ve established that, whenever you swim, how does your body float on the water? Is there some kind of trick?”

“A trick… if it’s just floating, I guess that would be not uselessly adding energy, and holding plenty of air in your chest.”

“That’s right, if you hold air in water, you’re able to float aren’t you? That reason is simple, because air is way lighter than water. ‘’Bubbles’’ you spit out from your mouth inside the water go straight to the water’s surface, no? The mechanism of a blimp floating in the sky is exactly the same. Essentially, you’re just doing this in the air.”

“In the air…? But, the stuff that’s inflating the blimp is air, isn’t it?”

“That’s true, but there are many kinds of air, Matthew. Hmm, shall we change our comparison a bit? —Then, Haro, haven’t you felt cooler when you lie down on a hot day?”

“Ah…yes, I have. I often took afternoon naps together with my younger brothers.”

“Thanks for that heartwarming episode. That’s right, You’re cooler when you’re sleeping than when you’re standing because hot air naturally rises to the top, and reversely cool air stops at the bottom. So, I want you to relax your minds and think about that just a bit— if I were to say it differently, doesn’t it mean that ‘’hot air is lighter than cool air’’?”

The first things after those words, as if something clicked in his mind, Torway clapped his hands together.

“—I see, I got it, Ik-kun! In other words, the air inside the dome, or blimp, is warmed by

the flames of a fire spirit, making the entirety of the fuselage lighter than the air outside and it floats!”

The young man answering gleefully, but Ikta turned his thumb downward while sticking out his tongue

“Bzzt! Sorry about that triumphant face, but you’re wrong, Ikemen. Well, it can fly with that in theory though. However, the practical problem is whether fire spirits could create fire endlessly- eventually they’ll run out of fire, and on the day they load the fuel, it’ll be too heavy and it won’t be able to float. The hot air balloon you’re talking about is transportation of the imagination for now. Hey! You got that?”

“When you’re talking to Torway, your attitude becomes pretty outspoken, doesn’t it…? It’s fine, so tell us the right answer without being mean.”

Ikta, admonished by a stunned-faced Yatori, nodded slightly and turned toward her.

“O~kay. Since Shia is also here, this will quicker with a stage show. Let’s see… does anybody have a silk handkerchief or something? It’d be better if it’s as thin and fine-textured as possible though.”

Ikta didn’t miss the movements of Her Highness, the Princess, who immediately clutched her pocket the moment he called out.

“Oh, Princess. It appears that you have something that fits the description.”

“Y-you can’t have this! Find something else!”

“You’re pretty cruel, aren’t you? Even though earlier you just said, ‘If need be, devote your very best.’”

The princess, prodded in a painful place, stopped her words of rejection. Ikta had already come to know how to deal with her. As part of the Imperial Family, it was the rare strength of her sense of responsibility that was Her Highness, Chamille’s virtue as well as her weakness.

“Although, for working out a plan for this point forward, it’s a very important explanation… You won’t let me have it no matter what?”

Being asked again in that manner, the princess, feeling that she had an obligation, couldn’t continue shaking her head horizontally. Ikta took the handkerchief which the young girl removed from her pocket with quivering hand using an affected carefulness.

“I am grateful for your kindness. ..Ahh, this is good fabric. I’ll be back after I soak it a bit.”

When he confirmed that the thing met his requirements, Ikta ran to the water’s edge and dipped the handkerchief in seawater. Bringing that back without wringing the moisture, and wrapped the right hand of the fire spirit Shia whom Yatori was hugging, with the dripping cloth.

“Haro, let Shia drink some water from Miru’s ‘water spout’ for me. Yatori, you remember this, don’t you?”

“Yes. I placed my hands directly above his ‘fire chamber’, didn’t I?”

When Shia drank up about a bowlful of water, while layering her own palm on his right hand, Yatori gave an order.

“Shia, light a fire in your right hand. One minute is fine.”

Shia shook his head horizontally and refused her command. It was because he couldn’t inflict a burn onto his master.

“You can’t light it? That won’t work- please do it as much as you are able to.”

When Yatori modified and repeated her order, after a little while, the hissing sound of air escaping from the handkerchief covering Shia’s right hand began to be heard. Following that, the handkerchief covering the fire spirit’s hand gradually rose with the pressure inside.

“Alright, this looks good.”

Choosing a suitable time, Ikta took a string meant for sewing from his breast pocket and tightly gathered the bottom side of the inflated handkerchief with it. Doing that, he then unfastened the small cloth dome trapping gas inside from Shia’s hand and showed it to everyone.

“Please watch carefully, since it’s only for a moment. —and, go!”

Ikta released his hand at a low position, and the inflated handkerchief, not yielding to gravity, to the contrary somehow rose to the sky. As surprised voices rose, he caught the handkerchief which was escaping toward the sky with both hands.

“A floating gas blimp dependent on the light air that fire spirits produce when they drink water such as when I did that trick earlier— better known as ‘rising air’. That’s the principle behind the Kioka Republic’s blimp. Incidentally, when you light ‘rising air’ on fire, it explodes while burning. That’s a type of fire called ‘spit fire’ which you learn about in the Alderah Theology Spirit Department. Imperial citizens do nothing but look at the phenomenon called ‘fire’, but they should also turn to the gas that acts as its source, no?”

Torway’s nicely shaped eyebrows rose greatly at the impact of the thing that occurred in front of his eyes.

“That’s amazing, Ik-kun…. I knew about ‘spit fire’ as well, but I didn’t hear anything except that it was useless fire that didn’t nothing but explode fiercely. To think that it had such a ground-breaking function…”

“That’s because ‘rising air’ displays its real worth when you use it in large amounts. Normally, it’s difficult to use even if you burn it.”

“That’s so weird… Why don’t they talk about ‘rising air’ in class even though they teach about ‘spit fire?’ Is that because the construction of a blimp is prohibited?”

Yatori gently answered Matthew’s question, which was full of discontent.

“You reversed the cause and effect, Matthew. It’s because rising air can only be obtained in this manner that the Church of Alderah prohibited the construction of blimps. Though I think that you understand since you saw the trick earlier- this time ‘I had Shia produce ‘’something I normally wouldn’t be able to have him produce’’.”

“—Huh? He wouldn’t make that for you normally?”

“Of course not. Even if I order something like, ‘produce rising air’ or ‘produce the source of spit fire’, a fire spirit would never produce the same thing. This thing called ‘rising air’ is no more than a byproduct of Shia’s[11] efforts to not burn me[12] if he can help it and somehow try to produce ‘spit fire.’”

“…I see. In a way, you can’t obtain it without ‘deceiving your spirit.’ I don’t understand it. Considering that having a human obtain this is not the true intent for a spirit nor for the Supreme God, it might be a reasonable argument from the standpoint of the Church of Alderah which guides everyone…”

“Although, concerning the prohibition of blimps, there’s also the separate reason of engaging in ‘insolent behavior such as rising in the sky with a human body, or trying to draw closer to the Supreme God of the Heavens without acknowledging one’s rightful place.’ Well, whatever the case—”

“It’s similarly ‘unscientific,’ as you said it, Solork.”

Her Highness, Chamille, pouting her lips, took her next lines early. While shrugging his shoulders, Ikta untied the string binding the borrowed handkerchief as if he just remembered.

“No no, I wouldn’t think those disrespectful things even in a dream.”

Her Highness, the Princess, snatched the handkerchief, which Ikta innocently tried to touch to his forehead, with a desperate expression. When she remembered what she had used that for last night, she was about to emit flames from her face by just having it held by someone else.

While turning a completely unrestrained smile toward the princess- who was making threats- Ikta resumed his speech.

“Well then, we got slightly off topic. Since my point was how to use this blimp.”

“Can’t we all ride it and cross the border? It’s cramped, but if we somehow force ourselves…”

“Quite the challenger, my buddy Matthew. However, sorry to say, but the limit on passengers is three people. Well, Her Highness, Chamille, is small, and if the three girls and skinny old me board together, we might be able to just barely go with four people. Though on the contrary, if Matthew and Torway board, it’ll be at full capacity just with that.”

“In addition, wind direction is a problem, isn’t it? Since the blimp doesn’t have its own propulsion, movement is entirely dependent on the wind. The same as a sailboat, in order to read and catch the wind, skill and familiarity with the terrain should be necessary. The Kioka Aerial Warfare soldiers who have practiced here are the only ones who can do that. We can’t compensate for knowledge and experience.”

Yatori contributed, and Matthew and Haro moaned with sullen faces. It was a rather difficult problem. The blimp left behind by the Kioka soldiers didn’t seem to be enough of a ‘gift from providence’ for them to be calm.

However, Ikta then shook his head in a surprisingly light manner.

“No, it’s nothing to be so disappointed about. Since, fortunately, plenty of gas[13] is left inside the dome. Once we have Shia refill it a little bit and release the ballast[14], we can at least float the blimp.”

“But what are you going to do once you’re floating…? If we can’t advanced in our desired direction, then, then it’s meaningless…”

Ikta turned a seemingly mean-spirited smile towards Her Highness, the Princess, who was gathering wrinkles on her forehead.

“Princess, in times like these you change your perspective. If we can’t use it as transportation, then we should think of another way to use it. It’s like a lady’s dress being tailored so it’s one size fits all.”

Haro and Matthew tilted their heads sideways, and Torway was the fastest to guess at Ikta’s intention.

“I see… This blimp itself can be material for a trade with the Kioka Army?”

“This time you’re correct, Ikemen. The blimp, made into something that determines superiority in this war, has a high the cost of manufacture, and for the Kioka Army, each and every aircraft is a precious treasure. They won’t let go of one so easily. Of course, I don’t expect that it would equal something like the bodies of six mere refugees”

“So it’s an unconventional hostage. …But, there’s still a problem. How do you plan to get our opponents to the negotiation table? Even if you threaten them with something like, ‘if you don’t accept our commands we break it,’ blimps, unlike humans, won’t walk. There’s no way we can cross the border while holding an air shooter at its back and return it when we arrive to the other side.”

“That’s right. The Kioka Army might wary of us for trying to trade a blimp to cross over to the Empire’s side. How ever you look at it, since it’s simply not refugee behavior, we’ll inevitably be suspected as spies. It should probably be a negotiation involving the commander of the border guards. If he sees through my identity in that time- even if they lose a single blimp- we might be the ones presenting a rather valuable hostage from our side instead…”

However, Ikta’s smile didn’t waver even slightly at Yatori’s and Her Highness, the Princess’s objections.

“That might happen if negotiations are dragged on. … But, I don’t intend on having them involve their higher ups. I’m aiming for lower class officers like the squad leader or platoon commander. I also plan to prepare some cheap tricks on our side so they aren’t able to exercise their own judgment.”

His allies’ gazes silently asked about the “scheme”. Ikta stuck his hand in his pant pocket, and took out the tag he stripped from the unlucky Kioka soldier from the previous night’s battle.

“First, since Kioka Army uniforms are a dark green color, if we wash out the blood stains, they’ll be unnoticeable. Second, the deceased owner of this tag isn’t that different from me

in both age and physique. And third- I think Yatori already knows this though, speaking of the trademark gag when I entertain women, ‘A Kioka Citizen when he’s ~ ‘ series is definitely happening.”

Everyone’s eyes gradually took on the color of understanding. Ikta watched that until he was satisfied, then spoke.

“I wonder. Unless that kind of performance succeeds with someone from this group, I don’t want to hear that there aren’t enough people.”

Entrusted with the position of commanding the 67th Platoon of the Kioka Army Western Border Defense Unit along the shore, Second Lieutenant Jif Halrum wasn’t exactly a great commander gifted with talent, but there was an established reputation in the reliability of her work ethic. Her sense of duty, understanding her position as a non-commissioned officer and completing the task she was given to neither deficiency nor excess, was valued by her superior officers.

Guarding the border required patience. And yet- because the opportunity to perform a brilliant deed or service was close to non-existent- it was all the more a task which talented or ambitious people weren’t inclined to take. All day long, while continuing to exchange glares with the Imperial Army that set up camp on the opposite side of the border, there was also a need for them to direct their awareness to the ocean so they couldn’t go around by boat.

Well, they ended with just sending the “no abnormalities” light signal to their superior officer usually three times a day. They gave as much food as they could to the refugees who crossed the border, then on a weekly basis, they assisted in sending them to the village on the rear side. It was a cause for annoyance that their numbers were increasing by the day.

“The time is sunset. Private Romari of Correspondence requests a report from the Squad Commander.”

Even when they gave orders to the Correspondence soldiers, they didn’t need to mention each and every detail. Nothing happened today that merited a report. Their stage partners were also fully aware of this.

“Goodness, so today also dawned and twilit without a thing…”

It seems that he’s forgotten that it’s war time- thought Nejif while watching her inferior leave. The reason being, the Empire hadn’t conducted a large-scale invasion on the Republic even once since the start of the war. As a result of the Aerial Warfare Division’s activity, the progression the war consistently and one-sidedly shifted in their favor. As personnel who were set aside as preparation for attack, Nejif and the others’ job was practically no different than if they were in peacetime conditions.

“If it’ll be like this until the end, it’s nice that we’ll end without our allies dying, but… does the Empire have no intention of waging war seriously?”

It was obvious to Nejif. For the Empire, which didn’t have a way to readily counter the Aerial Warfare soldiers, attacking was the only way to begin their efforts in this war. Even

though they'd only exhaust themselves even if they continue their defense, why didn't they implement that….? Even though it was something even a child would understand- despite being their enemy, he was getting frustrated.

"Second Lieutenant, there are friendly troops from the rear side!"

The things which one low grade officer worried about- her futile meditations- were cut off by the update of her subordinate officer rushing to the tent. While thinking about whether she had an appointment for a visit of some sort, Nejif rose from her chair.

"Isn't this sudden? Which unit are they? We don't have the preparations to greet them, but-"

"Their affiliation is unclear, but they're a small number. However, even from a distance, it's a strange line-up…"

There was perplexity on her subordinate's face. Nejif, deciding for now to see for herself, exited the tent.

The unscheduled friendly troops were coming closer one by one to a distance where she could discern their faces. There was one Republic soldier, two males- one plump and the other tall- dressed in lightly dirtied clothing, and furthermore three female children.

"…A refugee delivery?"

It was common for soldiers assigned to the patrolling mission to find and capture refugees, then bring those persons to the Border Defense Unit. Although it was a rare case that the refugees numbered even greater than the soldiers.

"—Stop there! Soldier in the front, reveal your affiliated unit and full name!"

Determining that her visitors had come to a distance to which her voice would carry, Nejif commanded them in a loud voice. Hearing that, the solider straightened his spine and bowed, then began speaking at a rapid pace from which one could sense slight panic.

"I am a member of the Seventh Independent Battalion of the Republic Army, aboard Patrol Craft 24, Private Nihad Hyu of Aerial Warfare! I apologize for not making arrangements, but I'd like to ask for an audience with your commander as soon as possible!"

"Aerial Warfare Solider Nihad? I am Second Liutenant Nejif Halrum, commanding the 67th Platoon of the Kioka Army Western Border Defense Unit, but what are you in such a hurry about? First, if you're on a patrolling mission, you're supposed to move in groups of three per squad. What happened to the remaining two?"

When the reply came back immediately, the young soldier who introduced himself as Nihad- an Ikta Solork in disguise- showed a paled face that didn't seem like an act at all.

"There was a situation and they aren't here. Anyway, since there is no time, I shall give a brief explanation. —Please look to the eastern sky. Do you see that a blimp is floating there?"

Hearing that, Nejif also noticed the round silhouette floating in the sunset sky. Since it wasn't strange for blimps to fly to the vicinity of the border from the rear side, she hadn't been particularly aware of it until now, but….

“It’s flying at a pretty low altitude, isn’t it? What is is doing? And once the sun sets, landing will become pretty difficult too…”

“Even if wants to land, it isn’t able to. The ones aboard that blimp right now aren’t my partners. They are the allies of these people.”

Nihad motioned toward the people he brought along. Nejif lifted her eyebrows without thinking.

“…What did you say?”

“These people are refugees who came from the Empire. On the day of the storm from before. It seems that they drifted to the Republic in a small boat. Assigned on a patrolling mission, we landed in this vicinity temporarily since night was approaching, but we came across these people in the forest along the shore.”

“Hmm… Then?”

“From there the story gets complicated…. The moment we encountered them, when we fired one shot from an air shooter to intimidate them, the startled bunch began to flee all at once. Chasing after them, we were able to capture one each, but unfortunately, the direction they escaped to was the location where we left the blimp, and…”

He appeared to have fallen silent from shame, and Nejif guessed the entire situation.

“…It was stolen! You suffered an embarrassing defeat at the hands of the refugees, and lost the Republic Army’s precious blimp!”

“I don’t have any excuses. I wouldn’t have any objections to being torn limb from limb in the Public Court for this.”

In the opening when the emotion of surprise outweighed that of suspicion inside Nejif, Ikta casually mixed in his cheap tricks.

The “Public Court” was the popular name for the Kioka Republic’s Judicial Branch, and it allowed the attendance of ordinary citizens to preserve the impartiality of the arrangements. So to speak, it was “a place where people’s sins are openly judged as the public- sovereign in the nation- watches attentively,” but on the other hand, the citizens of the republic- especially government officials and soldiers, positions that receive salary from taxes, follow the cliche where they reflect and contemplate their own lives.

In the monarchical Katjvarna Empire, the phrase for dealing with this would be “before His Majesty, the Emperor without even a defense,” or “humbly reporting a failure in a court of martial law”. It was a small difference that gave rise to the variations between the systems of government and the characteristics of their citizens, but if not for this minor part, the humans would regard their stage partners as compatriots.

“…But, Nejif-dono. Before that, won’t you please help lighten my crime?”

“Even if I wanted to, we must have that blimp returned to us no matter what!”

“That is why I’d like to receive your help. One of the refugees who stole that blimp, in the short time as they broke from the ground and floated high into the sky, thrust a deal at us.”

“A deal…? Just what were the details?”

“It was, ‘give my family and allies plenty of food, and see them to Empire under the pretense of returning prisoners of war. Once I see that their six figures have crossed the border half-way, I’ll lower the blimp.’”

Nejif’s expression distorted with annoyance, and her mouth spit out unproductive words.

“Ridiculous, I thought they’re people who abandoned their native land. Do they think that the Empire is now still warmly welcome those who abandoned it and came running back? Surrendering to us and becoming citizens of the Republic is the wiser choice by far.”

“That’s what I think too, but there’s no persuading the people themselves of that now. On the other side of that, since they already terrorized us and stole our blimp, they should be in a state of mind where they won’t respond to our attempts. When we first met them, if we had received them peacefully without intimidating them, then it might be a different story, but…”

That’s exactly right- Nejif seemed about to yell. No matter if they were refugees who abandoned the Empire, their hearts were probably wavering in the space between their native land and this new one. If a gun or something was suddenly fired in the middle off that, it’s not impossible that they would end up thinking that Kioka had no intention of receiving them.

“Even though an order to give refugees a warm reception was handed down, you did a pretty thoughtless thing…. No, I won’t start to blame only you, Aerial Warfare soldier Nihad. More importantly, what about the other two? In the formation of the Aerial Warfare Division, wasn’t a sergeant supposed to be included?”

It was logic that the highest ranked person would come to meet him- Nejif was implicitly reproaching him. Under a false panicked expression, Ikta was actually nervous. Because whether or not he could manipulate this part would decide the success or failure of the scheme.

“There were circumstances for that…. My allies are taking different route than I am, and they are now directly under the blimp. The ones currently aboard it are amateurs, so it isn’t impossible that some time for whatever reason they won’t sink to the ground, or even ride the wind and be carried off to the side of the Empire. We had to leave some hands to secure or destroy the fuselage when that happens. At the minimum, two people are require to secure it, and when it comes to the decision of destroying it, the one entrusted with the heavy responsibility of that decision, no one but the squad leader…”

Nejif was at a loss for reproaching words. Certainly, if it amounted to handing it over to enemy hands, they had to destroy it. Perhaps because there wasn’t much gas inside because it was stolen immediately following landing, the blimp was even now just barely drifting within range of an air shooter. If that was the case, then it perhaps it might be possible to shoot it down.

However, since it was a blimp, shooting it down with an air shooter came with the possibility of disaster- the blimp popping and scattering- which they couldn’t ignore. If that happened, the deaths of those onboard were certain, and the Kioka soldiers would also have lost a precious blimp in its entirety. They had to avoid that as far as they could. It was now that Nejif understood what he himself was aiming for.

“Don’t tell me, Private Nihad… Do you plan to give in to the threats and have the refugees cross over to the side of the Empire? No, the fact of the matter is that you’re referring that accommodation to me?”

“I’m ashamed, but as you guessed…”

“Ridiculous- as if I can engage in that kind of conduct by own discretion! In the first place, I don’t have the authority! My mission is to get rid of people trying to cross the border without permission- I can’t ferry people who’re already on the inside the border to the opposite shore!”

“I am aware of that, but please consider it carefully. The ones who’ll be blamed for the failure aren’t restricted to only us. These refugees came here by crossing the ocean under Lieutenant Nejif’s jurisdiction.”

At those words, Nejif opened her eyes wide with shock. …That was right. She had done nothing but criticize him, but when she saw it from this perspective, wasn’t it also her own error? Even being ordered to receive refugees warmly didn’t mean one should let them pass through the border without stopping them. Of course, to urge a citizen of the Empire to flee, they had intentionally created several gaps in defense on the border line. But, these people hadn’t crossed through those.

Ikta saw that Nejif’s heart, wavering between responsibility and self-preservation, was in his hand. As someone with a strong sense of responsibility, she wasn’t running to simple solution of self-preservation, but nonetheless, Nejif did possess that kind of character.

But, the youth discerned it. According to the art of war- one must create an escape route for an enemy driven to the wall.

“…Lieutenant Nejif. If I express my own thoughts, we ought to make taking back the blimp our higher priority. The crime of sending back refugees, the crime of losing a blimp. When it comes to that, the one Lieutenant should choose is the one that results in smaller losses for the Republic, right?”

Ikta’s crafty side lay in having the achievement of self-preservation and of responsibility coexist. He let her digest that the deportation of refugees, or abusing one’s authority, was a small vice for the great affair of taking back the blimp. That self-preservation just happened to be nothing more than a consequence of that. To make a steadfast character shift, this kind of set up was effective.

“…I-I can’t make the decision by myself. I’ll contact the company commander via light signal, so for now just…”

“Please stop the jokes! Relaying these circumstances by light signal would require too much effort, and do you think that that blimp will stay in Kioka skies until you finish speaking with your superior!? If you’ll let me speak as a person lined up as the lowest of Aerial Warfare soldiers, the possibility that the wind in the upper sky will begin blowing toward the ocean from now is strong. If that happens, since the blimp might descend far into the open ocean, we will have no choice but to shoot it down. At any rate, a precious armament will be lost from our hands!”

Of course, Ikta had no intention of either letting her dial her superior nor thoroughly think

it over. This scheme, if one was calm, had several holes to be found. More important than anything was to steal her time for making a decision. He had to make her believe that the plan he proposed was “the only thing they could do.”

“O-once we lead these people, is there a guarantee that that blimp will come down!? From the perspective of those on board, isn’t that simply returning in the middle of their enemies a suicide mission?!”

“No, they’ll definitely come down. …Lieutenant, have you ever been aboard a blimp?”

“Well, no, but…”

“Then you probably don’t know. How lonely it is boarding that and floating in the sky. People by nature are creatures that live with their feet planted on the ground. Defying that and taking to the sky requires immense courage. During training, even I was seized with the feeling that my body was paralyzed. At that time there was only one thing I could think of… I want to return to the ground, even one second earlier- only that. There was no room to care about anything else.”

“B-but aren’t they actually doing that and enduring it right now?!”

“If the lives of family and friends are in the balance, even fear might be lost in desperation. But the very moment the tensioned string is cut, they will realize it- the fact that they are in the sky with no one to turn to.”

The reasoning that Ikta used for persuasion was, of course, plain improvisation, but for Nejif who had heard it, it echoed weightily as an experience which only ‘someone who knows the sky’ could speak of. Even the five people impersonating refugees and spying on the situation could help but be amazed by his acting ability.

Authority disappeared from Nejif’s objection. With that, Ikta knew that he’d overcome the difficult part of the negotiation.

“…Even if we bring these people to the side of the Empire, it’s evening. Can they see that from the blimp?”

“I don’t know. But it’s actually more convenient under thicker darkness, and there’s a light spirit holder among them. Once we’ve crossed halfway to the border, if we send out an Imperial style light signal, communication with the blimp could be possible. That is to say, someone to make them send it is necessary. I should hold my air gun and follow them.”

As though it were an obvious responsibility, Ikta suggest that he accompany the refugees crossing the border. Since it was a spontaneous idea in terms of the flow of the conversation until now, Nejif didn’t feel that it was particularly out of place.

“I understand what you’re saying. I understand, but…”

But the anxiety remaining inside Nejif was the final obstacle preventing her from shaking her head vertically. As the commander of the Border Defense Unit, the risk involved with letting people whose identities she didn’t know come in and out of the border made her uneasy.

“I understand how you feel. However, please look carefully, Second Lieutenant Nejif. Do these people look like spies or manufacturing soldiers?”

With that said, Nejif carefully reexamined the people to whom Ikta had pointed. Young people who probably weren't mature adults. Three of them were girls. No matter how incompetent the Imperial Army was, it was impossible for a Unit that risked their lives and infiltrated enemy lands to have this kind of composition.

"If it's going to bother you no matter what, then all you need to do is inspect their belongings right? We don't have the leeway to interrogate them one by one, but I think that we might have time for that."

Those words became the final push. Nejif gathered creases on her forehead and after about a minute of silence, turned to her inferiors who had collected around herself for something or other, and finally sent out orders with a bitter expression.

"Search these people's belongings. Hurry!"

Five minutes after that, the inspection of belongings ended without a hitch, and the six of them, including Ikta, assembled and crossed over the border. Second Lieutenant Nejif's soldiers were directing vigilant eyes toward their backs, but the distance between them was already quite far.

"Well, that went better than I expected. Thanks everyone, I'm accepting applause and cash donations, you know."

Supposedly keeping watch, Ikta, impersonating the Republic Army's Private Nihad Hyu of Aerial Warfare, cracked a joke for the first time in a while as he pointed an air gun- of course, one taken from the Kioka soldier- toward the backs of his allies from the end of their line. Yatori gave a small snort from the vanguard.

"That was quite the scheme. To actually float an unmanned balloon and use it for coercion. It was hard to tell from here, but there was no one aboard the blimp in question. All they did was load a bit of their things onto it. Ikta for both negotiation and persuasion had invented an impossible imaginary terrorist, and thus tricked Second Lieutenant Nejif completely."

"What Kioka soldiers fear more than anything is losing a blimp. I thought that if we used that as a base, this method of threatening would serve our purpose well enough without even having to point a gun."

"By setting up an imaginary terrorist, you turned Second Lieutenant Nejif's focus away from us, didn't you? Just what'd expect, Ik-kun. I think that if this were a face-to-face dealing, the other party does have her reputation as a commander, and we might not have been able to pass through."

Torway directed a reverent gaze toward Ikta. In front of him, Haro also nodded moment by moment.

"I feel the same. Since it was in the form of 'advice from a friendly soldier,' it was also easier for her to comply with…. And in addition to that your acting ability! I'll bet Second Lieutenant-san from the other side probably didn't suspect Ikta's words until the end. Really, I didn't think that you actually could speak so fluently with a Kioka accent."

Ikta, praised by his allies, was triumphantly lifting nose up. The only person among them with a sullen expression was Matthew.

“Hmmph- I’m not just gonna shower you with praise. Since I’d just gotten used to that air gun, you see…”

“My buddy Matthew, please just forgive me for that. If you’d been holding an Imperial style air gun or sabre sword, then you wouldn’t seem like perfectly harmless refugees, right? It’s because we let go of them that we were able to get through the item inspection.”

As those words indicated, Yatori, Torway, Matthew- not a single one of the weapons those three had carried on their bodies remained. Even the ones they’d taken from the sinking ship. Yatori and Torway just didn’t say it, but they also held those dear in their hearts.

“Matthew, rather than sighing over the things you lost, show some appreciation for the life you were able to keep. Also, it’s not as if we’ve thrown our weapons away. Although, we did leave up to fate whether or not they’ll come back.”

Yatori nonchalantly smoothed things over. In short, those were the things which they’d loaded on the unmanned blimp. Though it was a small consolation, they were gambling on the possibility that the blimp would drift to the side of the Empire with the direction of the wind.

“It seems like we’ve reached the buffer zone. Well then, Kusu, would you send a signal of surrender to the side of the Empire for me?”

Hearing that from Ikta, Kusu, who was inside the pouch on Matthew’s hip, jumped down to the ground. Since it was necessary for Ikta to transform into Nihad during the negotiations, the two of them temporarily switched spirits with the other. Of course, since one couldn’t give orders to a spirit one hadn’t contracted with, the air shooter which Ikta was aiming before was no different from papier mache.

While Kusu sent the light signal, Ikta suddenly remembered something, and unfastened the air shooter barrel from the torso of the wind spirit Tsuu, whom he’d borrowed from Matthew. From his ‘wind tunnel,’ Ikta took out a small ring which he’d hidden inside.

“Princess, I return this to you. But please don’t drop it. From here on, that’s our proof of ID.”

The ring engraved with the seal of the Empire was turned over to owner from Ikta. Speaking of Her Highness, the Princess, both her clothing and skin were covered in dust, similar to the rest of the actors. However, so her beauty wouldn’t stand out, they’d smeared mud on her proud, blonde hair. Ikta was also in a seemingly tragic state, but strangely, the person herself, not especially giving an answer, only stared at the youth motionlessly with her two large eyes.

“…? Is there something on my face?”

“…No. Aside from your nose, eyes, and mouth, nothing.”

While giving a meaningless response, the princess didn’t avert her eyes from him. When Ikta tilted his head, Haro, who was standing next to Kusu, yelled in a loud voice.

“Ahh- Soldiers from the Empire are here! W-we won’t be shot right!?”

“As we barely escape enemy territory with our lives, we are shot by friendly troops and perish… That’s really not funny, you know.”

Everyone felt a chill down their spine at that image, but fortunately that turned out to be paranoia. The seal of the Empire, which Her Highness, Chamille, showed the soldiers proved tremendously more effective than they’d imagined.

When the ring was confirmed authentic by the high grade military officers assigned to Border Defense, the six of them were carried inside Imperial territory with excessive ceremony. This was their escape from the hell into which they’d descended but for a paper-thin difference.

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When Yatori, making a sarcastic remark, finally reached the bedroom and drew the curtains, Ikta was lying half naked on the bed with freshly wrinkled sheets.

For the Katjvanmaninik Dynasty, ever since the administration attained unity, the sunlight beating down on the country did not face a decline. Its inhabitants with light clothing and travelers with turbans wrapped around their faces, each resisting the fury of the sun.

However, people weren’t constantly being overwhelmed by heatstroke. The marketplace was lively under the lord of fire, and food and clothing, ornaments with precious stones and metals, and furthermore foreign goods which no one had seen before had the store fronts on the street overflowing with activity.

The heart of the Katjvarna Empire’s business, politics, and culture, the capital Banhataal. The capital, the grounds in the territory of the Emperor which celebrated his prosperity. In this metropolis, the palace where the Imperial Family resided existed together with the garden of a magnificent evergreen tree.

“Ikta, Wake up! Information arrived about the state of the Eastern Province, you know!”

On the third floor of a leading high class hotel even within that capital, “the White Gold Sand Dune,” Yatorishino Igsem was banging on the door of a private room. The time was past 11AM. For the fiery-haired girl with the absolute habit of sleeping and waking early, there was no reason to let be the person still out like a light at this hour.

As she continued banging on the door without even caring that there was no response, suddenly a rich sound of an open palm striking a cheek with all its strength echoed back. In front of Yatori’s blankly staring eyes, the door was finally thrown open. The one there wasn’t a sleepy-eyed youth, but an exquisite woman with her clothing in meaningful disarray.

“G-good morning, miss. …So, umm, that was rude of me, wasn’t it…?”

While fastening her loosened collar with both hands, the woman slipped out from beside the girl and left down the hallway. Yatori, watching her receding figure with a sidelong glance, stepped into the room while breathing a heavy sigh.

“How many does that make now? It hasn’t even been a month since we came here- there’s

a limit to your enthusiasm right?”

When Yatori, making a sarcastic remark, finally reached the bedroom and drew the curtains, Ikta was lying half naked on the bed with freshly wrinkled sheets. If it was just that, then one would assume that it was immediately ‘after the fact,’ but there was a bright red hand print left on his cheek. It was a difficult call to make.

The youth’s eyebrows drew together at the unrestrained flow of sunlight from the window.

“…How many you say, so that’s not a good thing…? …It’s morning, what time is it now…?”

“It’s already noon. You were definitely out drinking yesterday night, weren’t you? Out all night with women?”

“I was drinking until dawn, then I was invited to my room, so I starting drinking anew here, and I was sleeping together with her until just earlier. …When we opened our eyes with your knocking, for some reason she gave me a slap in the face at full power and left. She was completely unreasonable though, since I hadn’t even done anything yet… ”

Ikta complained from atop the bed. The correct verdict was before— Yatori shrugged her shoulders and surveyed the room, which reeked of alcohol.

“—Where is Kusu? If he fired a High Beam or something at your sleepy eyes or something-”

Hearing Yatori’s voice, Kusu showed himself from a basket- which was a sleeping area for spirits prepared by the hotel- beside the bed. As if immune to the evils of waking from sleep, this one quickly stepped out from the basket and opened his mouth.

“Good morning, Yatori, Shia. I think that Ikta is still sleepy. Since it seems he had women serving as his companions until late last night.”

“It’s fine, Kusu, that doesn’t make much of an excuse. Deal with it and wake up, you sex-obsessed male. …That woman from before seemed like it, but you wouldn’t put your hands on a married woman, are you?”

“Fataaha is a widow, you know… She’s also separated from her two children and now is a lonely time for her.”

“The art of going after older women is tricky, isn’t it? If you’re not careful, those children will end up being older than you are. I mean, you take your lady friend’s personal statement as at face value? Didn’t you see her painful eyes before?”

Without answering, Ikta slowly got off the bed while putting on the shirt folded under his pillow.

“…It’s hot today, too. And I really wanted to spend my time in bed until the sun set… Hahhh.”

“If you’re still half-asleep then read this. It should wake you up more than washing your face with ice water.

Yatori stuck a newspaper extra that was being distributed outside in front of Ikta’s face as he gave a large yawn.

“Commander Hazaaf Rikan is dead. —With this, the Eastern Province has fallen completely into the hands of the Kioka Republic.”

Even this youth ran short of lighthearted comments and gazed intently at the newspaper in his hand.

Going a little less than a month back in time. Ikta and the others, six of them, having achieved their return to the Empire from the Kioka territory where they’d washed ashore, after entering the care of the soldiers on the border, were carried to a military base in the rear side. There, they were greeted by the Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Stronghold Hazaaf Rikan himself.

“…You Highness, Princess Chamille! Thank goodness you’ve come back safely!”

The princess made an appearance at the building of the imperial headquarters, and together with other non-commissioned soldiers, Lieutenant General Rikan immediately knelt down, celebrating the aristocrat’s safe return. Rikan was soldier with both a tall stature and broad shoulders, and his luxurious beard and mustache anxiously arranged in a gentleman-like fashion. Even with his body stooped over, he was at the same eye level as Her Tiny Highness, the Princess.

“Raise your head. Surely you have other engagements, Commander-in-Chief, so I’m touched by your personal welcome.”

Her Highness, the Princess, having changed into a clean blouse and skirt, responded to her subject’s bow in a stately manner unbecoming of her age. …Even as a commander who directed 10,000 soldiers, he was no more than another subject in front of this young girl. Who in the world had she brought with her?— He properly took notice of the five people behind her.

“A ship headed toward the venue of the High Grade Military Officer Exam sunk, and Her Highness, who had been aboard, had gone missing… We were contacted the other day and informed of both those things a few days earlier, but to think that you drifted ashore on Kioka Territory! When I received a message from the border I thought it was impossible.”

“Indeed. Don’t consider it anything less than a miracle that I was able to come back in one piece as I am. And that is entirely due to the aid of the five people behind me. I shall introduce my heroes’ names to you, Lieutenant General, from my own lips.”

As Her Highness, Chamille, announced their names one by one, Lieutenant General Rikan lost control of his expression.

“So that’s what happened… O, brave youths, you did well to escort Her Highness to this point. If you were my subordinates, I would grant you all promotions at once. Without a doubt this is a service of first-class merit.”

They were words of unrestrained praise, but Her Highness’s expression suddenly then sank into anguish.

“It would be nice if you really could do that, but…. Because they were entangled in my misfortune, their High Grade Officer Exam was interrupted. I would like for you only to do something for that…”

“Hmm… certainly, the Secondary Exam Continuation has already been carried out. …And since there isn’t any kind of precedent, it’s difficult to make a firm promise. But if I relay the circumstances to the administration headquarters, they might make some kind of special accommodations. If it is something Your Highness wishes, I could even have them send it from the front lines with a single stroke of my pen.”

“That would be great. I apologize for adding to the Lieutenant General’s work, but…”

“Anything you please. Since to let young talent be buried would be to lose 100 years from our country, right?”

Yatori and Torway silently stopped Haro and Matthew from letting their faces light up in regards to their remaining hopes regarding results of the High Grade Military Officer Exam. Just the one person remaining had to be careful not to appear indifferent, but…

“Well then, Your Highness. With this, I think it might be best if you return to the capital as soon as possible and offer reassurance to His Majesty, the Emperor. Since this is encampment of the front lines, I’m hesitant to call it safe…. Certainly I’m aware of your exhaustion, but if we send out horsemen tonight, you can ride together with your heroes and return.”

Lieutenant General Rikan spoke courteously, though in a tone of voice that didn’t allow for refusal. Of course, Her Highness, the Princess, didn’t have any objections.

It was decided that the six of them, allowed to spend the time until departure at their leisure as per the Lieutenant General’s arrangements, would be guided to an improvised reception room. …However, as the others began to walk, Ikta Solork alone did not move.

“…? What’s the matter, Solork-kun? Possibly do you not feel well…?”

The Lieutenant General took notice of it and came closer, and Ikta then strangely gazed back seriously at his face.

“—You should retreat, Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan.”

“…What?”

“Abandon the Eastern Province, and withdraw all of the remaining troops to the Stronghold. There is no other option at this point.”

Needless to say, Lieutenant General Rikan- all of the officers in that location broke into an uproar at the youth’s drastic proposal. The five leaving for the reception room as well were surprised and looked at Ikta.

“…Don’t say such odd things. Until we drive away the Republic soldiers, until we achieve our mission as the Eastern Stronghold—”

“The supplies coming from the rear aren’t sufficient anymore, are they? Thin cheeks can’t be covered up with a beard, you know.”

At that keen remark, Lieutenant General Rikan put a hand to his face and was at a loss for words. Ikta continued further.

“If the officers here have weak color in their faces, the exhaustion of the soldiers must be greater than this, no? I dare say, aren’t refugees going one after the other?”

“…”

“There is no way that the land razed by the Aerial Warfare soldiers air raids is supporting the same number of soldiers as it has been up to now. When you delay a decisive defeat indefinitely, you only throw away the lives of soldiers and men in vain. …There is no meaning in this kind of battle. Shouldn’t you be the one who understands this best?”

Ikta roughened his voice and pressed the Lieutenant General for an answer. Yatori, unable to stay silent, grabbed the nape of his neck and restrained him.

“Know your place, Ikta! This isn’t something you can have an opinion about!”

“Place? Ahh, that’s exactly my point, you see—Mr. Lieutenant General can make a move ‘’because he can know his place too well’’. Why must the Eastern Stronghold continue fighting as a stronghold, why didn’t we stop devoting ourselves to defending in a war which we can’t win without attacking? This, that, everything—‘’It’s because it was ordered by the Emperor, isn’t it?’’”

The youth screamed. Clearly, that was a statement that trespassed on taboo. Yatori, sensing that he would go too far, had immobilized his shoulder in a double-arm lock and tried to hold him down before, but then an unexpected person landed the final word.

“Yatori, you don’t need to stop him. I’ll allow it. Let him speak as he pleases.”

With those words from Her Highness, the Princess, came the first time anyone made Yatori doubt her own ears. Katjvarna’s Third Imperial Princess, that is, she who is the Emperor’s own child, was supposed to be the first one to condemn Ikta’s rash outburst.

The moment Yatori- bewildered as she was- released his hand, Ikta lost all caution with using tongue.

“Let’s just say it already- this war is a fixed game. It’s the result of the Empire, which had wanted to let go of the Eastern Province since quite a long time ago, trying to achieve that in a way so its citizens’ criticisms wouldn’t be directed against it.”

Her Highness, the Princess, biting her lip and hanging her head as if she was utterly lost- Ikta as he was now didn’t even take the slightest notice of that.

“Originally the Eastern Province was unsettled land, a remote territory of Kioka until about 30 years ago when it was taken in an actual war. At that point in time, the Empire simply took pleasure in increasing its territories. However, it committed a massive blunder when it came time to cultivate the land which it had taken such pains to get hold of.”

The Eastern Province was a tougher land for people to live on than the Empire had previously expected. Even taking into consideration that they had to cut down the tropical forests, the flood damages were excessive compared to other areas. In the course of prolonged rainfall, the river overflowed and the roads and crops fields which they’d labored so hard to make ended up being submerged. With that, once sanitary conditions worsened, then diseases became prevalent. Each of the areas outside of the Eastern Province, as regions that were advancing despite fighting against drought, were yet another factor making the cultivation of the Eastern Province necessary. That wasn’t enough for the Empire.

“In comparison to the heavy capital which the Empire invested, the cultivation of the Eastern Province was lagging behind and not advancing. Not only was cultivation a national policy to begin with, it was too late to call back the people who moved there. By the time they took notice, the Eastern Province, far from turning profit, had turned into a land which endlessly exceeded their estimations as a waste of money.

“Of course the Emperor and the Cabinet regretted it: if it this was how it would turn out, then they were better off not having taken it in the first place. …So, with that someone among them realized it. It’s not too late even from now- this burdensome region, wouldn’t it be better to return it to Kioka?”

Nonetheless, there was of course no way they could surrender territory to an enemy nation unconditionally. Not only would the citizens not stand for it, more than anything it would be painfully obvious that their intention in doing that was push the internal administration’s failure onto another nation.

“Fearing their citizens’ criticisms in regards to losing the Eastern Province, the Imperial Family, out of ideas, tried to divert the worst of the anger in a publicity stunt some way or another. The means they had taken for that purpose turned out to be- of all things- a ‘lost battle.’

“The scenario was quite straightforward— for the Kioka Army which came invading, the Eastern Province would be taken back a second time. If this was the case, the citizens’ anger would be directed toward an enemy nation and the army’s incompetence, and it wouldn’t harm the Imperial Family’s dignity as much. …However, it’s a backwards method of caring only about appearances, and I’m honestly disgusted by it.”

Spitting those words out, Ikta gazed forcefully at the senior military official in front of him.

“This scenario seeks a sacrifice. Because, proof that ‘the Imperial Family and the Cabinet earnestly dealt with the Kioka Army’ is necessary. For that purpose, the person attending to the command of the front lines must be a general whose name is well-known. If such a famous general fought life and limb until the bitter end, then even the citizens would accept that defeat was inevitable, wouldn’t they?”

“…”

“There is no one more suited for this thankless role than you are, is there, Mr. Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan? You, who received the implicit command of ‘lose and die’ from the Emperor, in short are the ultimate sacrifice for covering up the internal administration’s failure.

Even after receiving such outrageous treatment, you still intend to stay on good behavior and know your place!?”

Ikta roughened his voice and pressed him for an answer, and Lieutenant General Rikan showed a weak, fleeting smile.

“…Solork-kun, I’m really glad that you are not my subordinate. I’d feel guilty for interfering with military regulation to let the youth who took the trouble to concern for my health not be punished…”

"…"

"Of course, I understand what you're saying. However, for a soldier, orders from the higher-ups are absolute. His Highness, the Emperor is the gracious supreme authority for all soldiers within the Empire- meaning, he has the right to absolute power. I must obey his orders. Obeying the orders of superior officers is a requirement for those who make up a military organization."

"I understand that you, as a commissioned officer, don't want to create a precedent of ignoring orders. …However, the Emperor is mistaken. Great generals don't spring forth endlessly from the land of the Empire. If he's going to let you die as a scapegoat and not treasure someone as talented as yourself, then do you even think that such a country has a future!?"

"It's not a soldier's job to talk about the future, Solork-kun. That is the role of His Highness, the Emperor. We subjects only know our places and give our very best. For example, well… it's a worst case scenario. Such as assembling a battle formation so that as many soldiers as possible can return without becoming prisoners of war when we lose the fight."

Ikta clicked his tongue at Lieutenant General Rikan's phrasing, which made him sense that there was a hidden meaning, and looked around the vicinity.

"Ahh, if you're a Lieutenant General, I guess you would make a move of that sort. Since the remaining personnel from the Imperial Headquarters are too few. Really… not only is everyone dressed as a soldier, but you're all putting on tough acts. You're letting all the youths with bright futures quickly run behind and take the rear guard[15] yourself?"

"The Kioka Army will come at us soon on the attack. If we are overpowered by the enemy and can't help pulling back the war front, then that's when we're allowed actual retreat. We'll stop the enemy in their tracks in the East, then we'll force their soldiers in the West fall back… To implement this two-stage operation, inevitably, we'll need to make use of our gradually decreasing forces and divide them further into two groups. If they're not skilled soldiers, then they're unfit for the job."

"If that's what's happening after their attack begins, then in that case we're better off moving forward with things how they are now! That way, there's no need to carry out that dangerous 2-stage operation. The hardships of the rear guard in keeping the enemy in check will decrease considerably, and as a bonus the Lieutenant General himself will live without being exposed to the brunt of things! Isn't that better in absolutely every way!?"

"I can't do that. Protection of the border is the Eastern Stronghold's assigned duty from His Highness, the Emperor. If we begin retreating before the enemy's attack, then that duty would become something personally renounced by me as the Commander-in-Chief."

"Go feel guilty about renouncing your duty, but at any rate the Eastern Province will be taken back by Kioka! The outcome is the same!"

"The processes are different. Upholding His Highness's orders and having it taken, and running against His Highness's orders and having it taken."

Rikan shook his head horizontally. Ikta finally lost his temper at the great general's

unending loyalty.

“That’s why I’m saying— ‘’this way of thinking is unscientific!’’”

Grabbing the soldier uniform’s collar with both hands, Ikta shook the Lieutenant General’s body, which was one head taller than his own. At the menacing air one wouldn’t imagine from his usual manner, even the five people, Her Highness, the Princess, and the others, looked on at the state of affairs in blank amazement.

When their hands unconsciously flew to their mouths, the color of the soldiers’ faces changed as one would expect. However— one step faster than they could recover, a vital blow volunteered by Yatori rapidly sunk into Ika’s side.

“…gah…”

Ikta’s knees suddenly gave way at the blow, which had been softened less than usual. His limp fingertips separated from the collar, and Yatori took that opportunity to carry up his body.

“Please excuse him, Lieutenant General Rikan-dono. …Think of that talk just now as a practical joke and forget it, I beg you.”

Yatori deeply lowered her head along with her long, fiery hair. As if forgetting to even straighten his disheveled coat, Lieutenant General Rikan looked directly at the two youths… at last, he changed his gaze to one of his subordinates.

“…Well, Officer Ordof, please show them to the reception room. With your utmost care.”

Following behind the soldier who’d received the Lieutenant General’s order and begun moving, the six of them began walking with Yatori shouldering Ikta at their lead. In the eyes of the older soldiers, Lieutenant General and the others, who were watching them leave, warmth and melancholy were coexisting.

“…Is history going to repeat itself…? Bada Sankrei…”

His five allies, who were close beside him, were the only ones who heard the final words the youth let fall.

“…I see…. Lieutenant General Rikan, is dead…?”

Lying face down with her eyes closed, Haro dedicated a silent prayer. The five of them, summoned by Yatori and gathered in the hotel lobby, shared the news of the death of the great general who should have been valued.

“Meeting the attack of the Kioka Army, the rear guard unit whose command Lieutenant General Rikan saw to personally experienced near total destruction… In exchange, it seems that the majority of the soldiers deployed relatively close to the rear escaped to the capital.”

The Lieutenant General fulfilled his duty to the very end, Torway spoke sorrowfully. Yatori and Matthew also corrected their seated posture and closed their eyes. They prayed wholeheartedly for blissful afterlife of the old soldiers scattered on the battlefield.

Among that group, Ikta, the only one with a sour face, was gently stroking the face of

Kusu as he held him to his chest.

“…Damn, didn’t I tell him?”

A low mumble twinged with a curse escaped from Ikta’s mouth, startling the waitress who was carrying tea. Next to him, Yatori indifferently made a quip while bringing a teacup to her mouth with a flawless movement.

“What, exactly, did you tell him? Aren’t you being conceited? Did you think that the state of the war would shift with your one opinion?”

Ikta couldn’t return any words. Instead, he poured gritty white powder from the sugar jar furnishing the table, which was distinctive to high class hotels, into his tea.

Haro, having finished her silent prayer and opened her eyes, felt dizzy at his reckless action.

“Th-these grains of sand, would it be bad to pour some in a bag and take them home…? As a souvenir for my younger brothers…?”

She suddenly veered from the solemn news of death to a cheap topic. …Be that as it may, the other actors, the five people who were officially excellent young men and women, also went on board thinking that it might be less objectionable than having lobby descend into gloom.

“I understand your feelings, but that’s bad etiquette, no? Well, the way Ikta’s using it might be as well.”

“Even without obsessing over grains of sand, we’ve also got rewards from the Imperial Family, right? Because at any rate we escorted Her Highness, the Princess, home from an enemy nation.”

Saying that, Matthew completely restored his stomach, which had caved in from being stranded, to its original state with the hotel’s luxurious meals. While measuring the passage of time in the course of its swelling, Yatori huffed a sigh.

“Rather than a year’s supply of high-grade sugar, there is only one thing I want for my reward. …A make-up test.”

“Th-that’ll be fine, right? It’s not our fault the ship sank.”

“It’d be great if things go that smoothly- but the number of successful applicants of the High Grade Military Officer Exam is set for every year. It’d be good if the all seats haven’t been filled up already. Arghh, we’re already half-dead, you know.”

Maybe her nervousness lessened after living for close to a month in the hotel, but there wasn’t as much ambition in Yatori’s voice as there had been at the time of the shipwreck.

“No no, I’ve put quite a lot of thought into it while living here, you see. It’s best if they contact us as late as possible.”

While sipping the tea sweetened by adding excessive amounts of sugar, Ikta commented with a voice which wasn’t as weary. This man, releasing the scent of women’s perfume from his entire body, was unmistakably the one most enjoying their current lifestyle.

“…Speaking of which, it’s decided that you’re getting a job at the library here[16] ?

Traveling expenses are cheaper, was it?”

Considering Ikta had no reason to cut his Exam short, Yatori, shamelessly steadfast, didn’t have the slightest intention of scrapping their aforementioned contract. Even so, there was no helping that her voice was tinged with a bit of resentfulness.

“In addition, my living expenses from before entering the lodging house became cheaper, too.”

Ikta spoke, shamelessly brushing it aside. Yatori cursed the naivete of her past self. —She should have punched his stomach harder. If only she had done that, she might have evened it out with medical fees.

As they continued their small talk in a relaxed atmosphere, there was suddenly a presence approaching with a purpose. The four of them save Ikta promptly straightened their backs. The one who came particularly to them with steady footsteps were three imperial court officers clad in imposing formal dress.

“Yatorishino Igsem, Matthew Tetridch, Ikta Solork, Torway Remeon, Haroma Bekkel, The people here are the five people we called now, correct?”

Everyone responded with a nod. The oldest officer cleared his throat with a cough.

“There is an article to be delivered to your residence from the Commander of the Eastern Stronghold, the currently deceased Lieutenant Hazaaf Rikan.”

As he spoke, the younger soldiers lying in wait on both sides of him stepped forth. In their arms, they were carrying a long, thin package wrapped in red cloth. Handling them with care, they placed them on the table and silently opened the wrapping.

“…Ah!? My air shooter!”

Matthew excitedly flew to his beloved gun. A beat later, Torway took in his hands his own air shooter, which was two grades better than the standard, and Yatori calmly in hers her polished saber and main gauche. Their favorite weapons which they’d accepted might never again return to them. Their arms trembled with the profound weight of iron and time.

“I’ll read the message from the Lieutenant. ‘-Since the blimp fell into the ocean on the side of the Empire, we were fortunately able to recover your belongings. I not only humbly return them to you, I entrust the future of the Empire to you as well, young heroes.’”

All of them straightened their posture and listened attentively. Rather than a message, that was more the contents of a last request.

“‘Though I am an old soldier, my will is undying. I pray for all of your continued luck in the fortunes of war from the realm of the dead.’ -That is all.”

Without being told by anyone, all of them spontaneously stood up, and bowed to the great commander who was no longer in this world. Even Ikta, the twisted person he was, was not immune to the respect harbored for one who had fulfilled his duty and died a noble death.

“Very well, then let’s move to the actual ceremony. A horse-drawn carriage is waiting

outside, so please come after leaving your weapons with the hotel. Come adequately prepared with dress that wouldn't be discourteous to the noblemen."

Light returned to Yatori's eyes. Now, a new wind was beginning to blow, whisking away the blimp that was staggering with no place to go.

"Subjects, please shed thy tears at the privilege of an audience. —His Highness, the Emperor, Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik awaits you at the palace."

Inside a horse-drawn carriage advancing toward the garden of the magnificent evergreen, each of the five's musings were their own.

"H-hey- Hey, Torway…! If remember correctly when we have the audience, we can't look at His Highness's eyes right? Then it's also impolite to speak directly with him without going through an attendant, and clearing you throat or sneezing is also absolutely forbidden, and then umm… ummm…!"

"Maa-kun, it'll be fine so calm down. When you enter His Highness's presence, kneel down, then after you just need to answer the things he asks you. Since manners for the Imperial Court aren't enforced by law, we won't have anything cruel said to us. That is, we're going there to be praised, right?"

The one trembling and easiest to understand was Matthew, whose round head was frantically turning red and turning blue above his shirt, which had been fastened to the first button against his will. Torway didn't have the time to spend all his energy worrying over calming him down from that kind of state.

"…fine, it's fine… Ilf, Shouka, Echiri… your older sister… you can rely on your older sister, so…"

While muttering the names of her younger brothers, Haro had all but entered the position of prayer. On the opposite side, only Yatori, who was patting her back, was calm as usual. The Igsem Family had received an imperial visit from His Highness, the Emperor, and in her case, today would not be her first time facing the emperor.

Then Ikta Solork. Since leaving the hotel, he'd decreased the number of words he spoke as if he'd become a different person. But, one can't be careless. Seen from the eyes of Yatori, who has known him from a long time, that was more an indication of ill humor than nervousness would be.

…Let's give him a warning at once. That's what Yatori decided while gazing at his expressionless profile.

"Ikta. I'm saying this seriously, but during the audience, only return acceptable answers to the things you are asked. No matter who I am, I refuse to hold you down in the presence of His Highness."

"…I got it. It's that my side hurts, and I would be suffering on my bed under normal circumstances."

For the youth, it was a slightly lackluster retort. The horse-drawn carriage came to a stop as they were traveling.

They were instructed to get off by the palace guards outside, and the five of them finally

stepped foot on the holy ground where the noblemen resided.

What first caught their eyes was the large temple edifice, built up by stacking smooth opalescent stones.

“…Impossible. This, the Holy White Temple…?”

Yatori’s pupils dilated. —For when His Highness, the Emperor, greeted people, there were three buildings in the palace at Banhataal. They were the Yellow Sand Temple meant for meeting with guests from outside the country, the Deep Green Temple meant for hearing the reports of his retainers, and the Holy White Temple meant for praising those who rendered great service to the Imperial Household.

The one situated closest to the Imperial Palace, in other words the mansion where the Imperial Family carried out their lives, was the Holy White Temple which Yatori and the others currently had before them. The only ones allowed to have an audience with His Highness, the Emperor, in this building were chief vassals who had done a truly great service to the Empire. The highest stair for soldiers, the promotion to field marshal, was conducted here.

“Please follow.”

Guided by a chamberlain [17] dressed in long-hemmed ceremonial clothing, the five of them stepped forward into the Holy White Temple. Even the great Yatori nervously toned down her gait. Regardless if they saved Her Highness, the Princess, that was the deed of an ordinary person who didn’t even hold an official rank. All she could think was that even if they did have an audience, it was something that could’ve been settled in the Deep Green Temple.

As a final review before entering they entered his presence, the maids corrected each of the five’s appearances. When they discerned that there was nothing that would be a cause for risk in front of His Highness, the bodyguard soldiers meant to be escorts, for whom it was allowed to wear swords, slowly opened the doors to the inner chamber.

In front of a lengthily laid out gold-colored carpet, the ruler of the country commanded the throne.

“Yatorishino Igsem, Matthew Tetdrich, Ikta Solork, Torway Remeon, Haroma Bekkel. - The aforementioned five people are visiting upon the summons of Your Highness, the Emperor.”

As soon as she gave that report, the chief chamberlain who had led them until now withdrew to the side and only the five young men and women remained in front of His Highness. The gazes of the nobility grew in pressure, and weighed on the backs of the five of them who were kneeling down.

“Chamille. These people’s services, from your mouth.”

His deep, dry voice called to his daughter. Upon that, Her Highness, the Princess Chamille, emerged forth from the vanguard of the line of retainers dressed in a snow white sari dress. It seemed that the fatigue from the shipwreck healed completely within one month, and with her long blonde hair also regained its former beauty, she was just like a single flower bloomed on the temple edifice.

“I shall make my report, Father. —First, the service of saving from the brink of death myself, who was shaken into the sea by the tremors on the occasion that the ship headed toward the venue of the High Grade Military Officer Exam sunk due to a storm. Second, the service of forcing the enemy to retire with cleverness and the bravery to risk one’s own life on the occasion that I was about to be captured by Republic soldiers. Third, the service of driving away my simple despair and finally escorting me across the national boundary by putting their quick wits to work despite finding ourselves with the misfortune of having Republic territory as the destination to which we drifted ashore at the end of the shipwreck.”

His Highness nodded lightly at the various services the princess listed and gazed at the forms of the honorable young men and women.

“Because of your services, my daughter, who shall inherit 900 years of the sacred blood of the Imperial Household, has returned to our roots without being captured by the savages of Kioka. You protected my blood kin- this is essentially equivalent to protecting the Empire. Therefore, young soldiers of our country’s defense, I generously award you with medals of honor. —Raise your heads.”

Receiving permission, the five of them timidly raised their faces. Then, they looked upon the human who took the role of ruler of the country in which they were born into life from a close distance for the first time.

The Emperor was not yet aged. He might have been slightly older than a 40-year old in the prime of manhood. …In spite of that, his bearing gave the impression of an enormous dead tree. The bony fingers of both his hands, his skin whose dryness was varnished over with large quantities of perfumed oil, his blonde hair faded to the ocher that lost both tone and luster, indicated the decline of both his mind and body without attempting to hide anything.

The dead tree with a crown on his head, relying solely on its dignity, slowly raised his right arm.

“Yatorishino Igsem, Matthew Tetdrich, Ikta Solork, Torway Remeon, Haroma Bekkel. —To these five people, today at this time, I grant the title of ‘Imperial Knight.’”

A long, long silence descended. The Emperor’s words didn’t soak into the five of their heads that easily.

“…Imperial Knight…? …Umm, that… in other words… a c-conferring of decorations!?”

In this moment, forgetting both his nervousness and decorum, Matthew’s round face shone with joy. Next to him, Torway widened both of his eyes as if he’d seen a ghost in broad daylight. Only Yatori remained the same.

It wasn’t illogical that the five of them would doubt their ears. The title of “Imperial Knight,” usually, was one of the supreme honors given only unto High Grade Military Officers who performed heavy services during war. The people who received this- although it was an honor limited to one person that could not be inherited by descendants- ‘’it added those people to the lowest seat of nobility’’.

The nobility under the Imperial class system existed for the purpose of selecting young

people from influential pedigrees to be related to the Imperial Family through marriage, and as a general rule one did not rise to nobility from the common class. The near unique exception to that was the conferring of decorations of “Imperial Knight”, and numerous benefits came along with it. A large increase in pension, a more influential voice in political matters, permission to attend meetings hosted by the House of Nobles[18]…more rights than their young bodies could handle would come falling into their laps.

Therefore, Yatori and Torway couldn’t simply rejoice. Even if the service had been saving the Third Princess, this was clearly an excessive reward, and it seemed to have thrown Torway, who couldn’t bring himself to embrace it with both arms, for quite the loop. Why let it go without being suspicious of the hidden side?

While supporting Haro, who’d fainted from shock, Yatori nonchalantly sent a slanted gaze behind her. …There was no color in the face of Ikta Solork. His clenched fists were trembling uncontrollably.

Some way or other pushing back the urge to immediately leap forward and strangle the neck of the head of the Emperor— that’s the feeling Yatori got. She was almost certain.

When the arrangements for the conferring of decorations were over, the Emperor leaned his weight on the throne as if that had completely tired his out. The chief chamberlain took care of everything that came after. The details concerning the preparation of the ‘Imperial Knights,’ and the results of the High Grade Military Officer Exam which had been interrupted by that incident. Here, their passing of the exam on account of the five’s special circumstances was announced to them. Though, since they were told after the conferring of decorations, both their surprise and joy had been weak.

Their unexpected audience ended without any indication, and the five of them were led down from the inner chamber before anyone could accurately make sense of the situation.

With Yatori, who was shouldering a fainted Haro, at their head, they left the Holy White Temple. Outside, in front of two covered horse-drawn wagons, the princess, clad in a white sari dress, was waiting for them.

“…Your Highness, Chamille…”

“I trust that was troublesome. But, please come with me for a little longer. Starting now, there will be a ceremony celebrating your conferring of decorations.”

With that short announcement, Her Highness, the Princess, boarded onto the left carriage on step ahead of them.

“We will be riding separately in threes. Yatori and Solork ride in this one. The remaining three in the other.”

It was a meaningful division. Everyone boarded as they were being told, and the carriage began moving not long after. While they were three people using a space that six might have used easily, Her Highness, the Princess, in the middle of a closed off guest cabin, began the conversation.

“No matter what we say here, the coachman can’t hear us. You don’t need to hold back anymore, Solork.”

The princess spoke as if she'd seen through Ikta's innermost thoughts. Ikta unclenched the fists he had held tightly all this time, breathed a single magnificent sigh, and ruffled his own black hair.

"You really came through, Princess. You've completely and utterly messed up my life plan. When- even if heaven and earth turned over- a soldier was the last thing I wanted to become…"

The youth who'd been an ordinary person until just an hour ago moaned. …Yes, Ikta was already a soldier.

It wasn't because he'd passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam due to special circumstances. In the end, that was simply receiving approval to enter the army as leading cadet, and the recipient himself could refuse it if he wanted to. Under normal circumstances.

The problem was the fact that he was conferred the title of "Imperial Knight." The conferring of decorations was an order from Emperor under the guise of a reward. Seeing that he was a commoner, this wasn't something he could refuse. Even more troublesome, that title involved enlistment in the military ''whether he wanted to or not''. The reasoning was plain and simple: ''a knight couldn't not be a soldier.''

"Since I've become a soldier, I can't defy directions from the army anymore. At this point, it's not 'authorization' to advance to a High Grade Military Officer Academy- it's an 'order.' …The librarian post at the National Library I worked so hard to get is worthless now. I don't even have the energy to get angry anymore."

Finding the excess space being a good thing, Ikta laid the half of his body above his hips on the seat. On the expression of her Highness, the Princess, who was watching this youth, though she was keeping up appearances with a blank face, feelings of guilt were faintly showing through.

"…Your Highness, we are grateful for having received unmerited honor. However, isn't it unnatural all the same?"

Yatori opened her mouth in exchange. The princess was silent and listened intently.

"'Imperial Knight'- as its wording signifies, should be a title given unto soldiers who have performed a great, meritorious war service. 'Knight,' since it's a decoration awarded to soldiers; the people who are given the title 'Knight' are already soldiers, therefore the order is backwards. As far as I know, there is no precedent for this conferring of decorations."

"There is no precedent. Therefore, one was created with you."

"Your Highness…"

"Yatori, I beg you, don't criticize me with that face! Of course, I did support it. However, your conferring of decorations was not my idea, but the desire of the entire membership of the Katjvarna Cabinet."

While still laying down, Ikta scoffed at Her Highness, the Princess's weak defense.

"…Even if it's a fixed game in reality, if the citizens witness the fall of the Eastern

Stronghold, it’s nothing more than a ‘losing battle.’ Their hatred is directed toward Kioka, and once they’ve pinned the blame on the army, it’s human nature to can’t help but feel uneasy, right?”

“…”

“Who you want to have at this time are idols who will inspire hope in the citizens… in short, heroes.”

The princess sighed. The accuracy of Ikta’s guesses was reliable, more than that, it was even frightening.

“…That’s correct. The timing of our safe return was too convenient. Young military cadets return home with the Third Princess who’d gone missing from Kioka as it was on the verge of taking back the Eastern Province. Amidst the unfortunate reports of the losing war, this news has become the sole light for the citizens. The government had no choice but to make use of this.”

“Ahh, so that’s it? I guess royalty does have the privilege of toying with the lives of ordinary citizens.”

Ikta’s sarcasm, devoid of any humor, had quickly become nothing more than a sword forged from words.

“At any rate, we’re now the heroes who’re supposed to reassure the hearts of the 20 million people in the Empire. …Well, let’s put that aside for the moment. As much as it annoys me, it’s not like imperial commands are going to change if we start complaining now. The thing I want to ask about before anything is something different.

—Hey, Princess. Just what the hell do you want by corralling us like this?”

Raising his upper body, Ikta finally cut to the heart of the matter.

“It’s the one thing that’s been bothering me from that start. What was someone like the Third Princess doing aboard a ship headed for the Hirgano Archipelago? Even an extremely sophisticated person such as myself can’t come up with a single good reason for you to have gone.”

“Th-that was part of official business. In light of the deterioration of the state of war with Kioka, to encourage the military cadets bearing the burden of this country’s future…”

“If your behavior had been immature for your age, then I’d have no problem accepting that cover for your true intentions. …But, it’s too late for that. Whatever it was, you’ve shown too much of your intelligence, you see. Not just me but Yatori and even Torway caught on that you, Princess, were keeping something to your tiny self. —Kusu, Highbeam.”

Kusu, held in Ikta’s arms, bathed Her Highness, the Princess, in a strong light. As if illuminating the inside of her secret heart.

“Ahh.. S-stop it, Solork, it’s bright…”

“I’ll just spit the truth out already. When we young men and women, just starting out with great potential for success, answered the call to guard the Princess… it’s obvious that we only came to make connections anticipating the profits in the distant future.”

Whether or not it was a response to the conferring of the title “Imperial Knight,” Ikta was unusually sadistic about criticizing the girl. However, it didn’t seem that the princess would let her scene partner assume the leading role indefinitely.

“…Is that cynicism something you learned from your father, Solork?… No, ‘’Ikta Sankrei’’?”

That moment, the youth stopped blinking. He made Kusu shut off the light by a sign with his finger, and glared keenly at his scene partner.

“…So the Imperial Family’s prided Central Intelligence Unit doesn’t even need one month to investigate someone’s personal history?”

“The only one who can deploy them is the reigning emperor. I’m not able to use them, and there was no need to use them this time anyway. Excellence in intelligence, tact, effectiveness in times of emergency. Taking on the accent of a Kioka citizen defected from the Empire. And above all, your threatening attitude toward the currently deceased Lieutenant Rikan, seeking the retreat of the whole army in defiance of Imperial command. Gathering the clues until now, there is more than enough for me to entertain a slight suspicion.”

Having regained control of the conversation flow, the princess suddenly turned an apologetic gazed toward Yatori.

“I must apologize to you, Yatori. In order to investigate Solork’s past, I negotiated with the Igsem Family without going through you. Since, witnessing the trust you two share, there seemed to be few things hidden between you.”

“…My father, talked about it…?”

“He did try to hide it. However, so he would have to speak to me, I commanded him with the power of the state. When I heard the truth by coercing him in that manner, though, the strength of your relationship became more and more mysterious.”

There was tint of confusion in the Her Highness, the Princess’s eyes when there was no evidence that the mystery would become clear.

“Despite formerly being an outstanding commander, he was branded with the dishonor of ‘war criminal’ for defying orders in the middle of an operation before meeting his end in imprisonment during the postwar period of the previous military campaign with Kioka, Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Army, General Bada Sankrei. And you are his posthumous son, Ikta.”

In the face of the trump card which Her Highness, Chamille, revealed, Ikta averted his eyes as if he were annoyed.

“I wasn’t born from notch of a tree, I mean, even Ikta-kun has parents. The man who provided the small seed for my birth might’ve had that name, now that I think about it.”

What was twisted has become outright childish. That’s what the princess thought once she reclaimed the leading role. Since that was something which had been taken from her ever since she’d met him, it also felt that, somehow, she was reclaiming her pride along with it, and without realizing it she was becoming more and more arrogant.

“I still have more! The person whom you called teacher, who was the first to preach the said way of thinking called ‘science’, wasn’t he the old professor who defected last year from the Empire to the Kioka Republic, the ‘blasphemer’ Anarai Kahn? It seems that he was the long sworn friend of Bada Sankrei.”

“Though the nickname ‘blasphemer,’ I think that the old man took it as a compliment.”

“I’m not nearly done yet! Your Kiokan accent was something you learned from your mother wasn’t it? At the time of victory, I hear that a beautiful woman whom the decadent reigning emperor had summoned to his harem from Kioka was granted to General Bada as a reward for distinguished service in war. Her name, if I remember correctly, wasn’t it Yuuka Sankrei!?”

The light of reason vanished from Ikta’s eyes, and his right hand, darting out, snatched the princess’s collar. This time, he even shoved Yatori- who had immediately moved to stop him- aside with his left hand.

“–Try saying one more insulting thing about my mother. I’ll strangle you to death with this hand.”

Ikta glared at the princess with a murderous expression he’d seldom ever shown. It didn’t last long— he released her when Yatori regained her stance. …However, that was enough. The incident lasting barely a few seconds carved the fear of ‘being hated by someone’ into the immature, young girl.

“…This is an uncomfortable conversation. When that happens, then I have to strangle you as well.”

While shielding the princess, who was in a state of shock, with her back, Yatori advised him in a low voice. Ikta, having calmed down, raised both hands and showed nonviolent intentions which contradicted his behavior.

With that, their conversation was interrupted. When the princess’s breathing, as she was being soothed by Yatori, all but returned to normal, the carriage, which had reached its destination, came to a stop. Ikta was the very first to open the door and come down from the guest cabin.

Quite some time should have passed by, but they were somehow still inside the garden. They had been transported to a plaza in the east suitable for the celebratory banquet. Within the garden, which was trimmed with vivid flowers in full bloom, luxurious food in a completely different league from the Imperial Academy Graduation Commemoration Party was lined on the tables, and high-class military persons and nobles with drinks[19] in one hand were mingling with light conversation.

“Ahh thank goodness- celebratory banquets really are first-class. I’m feeling a little better with this, you know.”

“Wait, Ikta, Her Highness still…!”

Taking no notice of the princess’s pale face, Ikta located Matthew and the others standing in a slightly removed location and promptly moved to meet up with them. Of course Yatori’s voice would have a tinge of criticism.

While having his back turned toward them, the youth spoke in a dry voice.

“Hey, Yatori. You passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam, and that came along with the title of ‘Imperial Knight’, which is leagues above just top of a class. Sure there’s a teeny reason not to be satisfied, but if you measure the pros and cons, today is undoubtedly a day for you to commemorate. Am I right?”

“…”

“On the contrary, how is it for me, I wonder? These things are exactly the same for me you see, and it’s without question the worst day of my life. Between today and the day my mother died, it’s hard to say which was better. In any case, even though it was the absolute last thing I ever wanted for my life, I became three things at once today. A nobleman, a soldier— and a hero.

“On a day like this, for the time being I’m just going to drink until I don’t know anything anymore. That’s the only thing I can think of.”

Finishing his speech with a wavering voice, without even returning a single glance toward Her Highness, the Princess, Ikta finally took his leave.

Likely, nowhere in the world did words exist that might have stopped him.

Translator’s Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ written as: 光明 (bright light); read as: みち (path, road)
2. Jump up↑ 数えで (old method of counting age where newborns are considered one year old, and years are added at every New Year)
3. Jump up↑ written as: 永霊樹 (Eternal Spirit Tree); read as: カトヴァンマニニク (Katjvanmaninik)
4. Jump up↑ written as: ツッコミ役 (straight man role); read as: ヤトリ (Yatori); generally, the two members of a comedy duo are known as the straight man （ツッコミ） and the funny man （ボケ）
5. Jump up↑ written as: 精霊 (spirit); read as: パートナー (partner)
6. Jump up↑ written as: 帝国 (Empire); read as: くに ((mother) country)
7. Jump up↑ written as: 捕虜 (prisoners of war); read as: こっち (this direction/one)
8. Jump up↑ written as: 帝国 (Empire); read as: ウチ (we, us)
9. Jump up↑ written as: 吊るし式寝具 (hanging-style bedding); read as: ハンモック (hammock)
10. Jump up↑ written as:気嚢 (air bladder); read as:ドーム (dome)
11. Jump up↑ written as:火精霊 (fire spirit); read as: シア (Shia)
12. Jump up↑ written as:主 (master); read as:私 (I, me)
13. Jump up↑ read as 揚気 (rising air); read as: ガス (gas)
14. Jump up↑ written as: 重り (weight); read as: バラスト (ballast)
15. Jump up↑ rear guard: the soldiers positioned at the rear of a body of troops, especially those protecting an army when it is in retreat
16. Jump up↑ written as: 帝都 (capital); read as: ここ (here)
17. Jump up↑ chamberlain: one who manages a household
18. Jump up↑ 貴族院 (House of Lords) The upper house of Parliament in the UK (the lower house is the House of Commons).
19. Jump up↑ the alcoholic kind

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 1 - Chapter 3

Katjvanmaninik's Watchdogs

Inside the Imperial Army Capital Base, the High Grade Military Officer Academy. A practice facility at a location about 30 kilometers south from the Capital Banhataal. The Katjvarna Empire at present had adopted a volunteer soldier system, and over 4,000 exclusive soldiers were stationed at the Imperial Army Capital Base during peace time.

"Run like you mean it! Privates or generals, I ain't putting up with no weak soldiers!"

A hysterical voice beside them rang out to the cloudless blue sky. For all ages and countries, the "instructors" at army facilities are basically "demon instructors." According to them, the training of subordinates, starting with the smashing of the sparkling treasures which new recruits enclosed in the chamber of their chests- mainly those naive illusions called free will or individual dignity- into tiny, tiny pieces.

"What's the matter, Warrant Officer Matthew Tetdrich! Wasn't 'Moving Blubber' supposed your selling point!? A blockhead meatball ain't nothing but a human shield on the battlefield!"

"…S-sir, yes, sir!"

"Your pace is slowing down, Warrant Officer Haroma Bekkel! Medics need to find injured people and run around faster than anyone! You think you're good for anything with that weak stamina?"

"Gasp- gasp- wheeze- Sir, yes sir!"

"Haro-san, keep going, just a little more…!"

"So you still have the energy to look out for someone else's exhaustion- not bad, Warrant Officer Torway Remeon! You just earned your kind self an additional three weeks! Be thankful for it!"

"…Sir, yes sir…!"

"Warrant Officer Yatorishino Igsem! Since you seem to love leading the charge, I'll reserve the front of the line for you! I'm not letting you run anywhere else! If you're overtaken, you're not stopping until you overtake 'em back!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

There were a total of 32 people, 24 males and 8 females, who passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam this time. For the first three months, which were devoted to basic drills, the group was gathered to receive grueling training from their instructor. Marathons, obstacle courses, group work, marksmanship, close-quarters combat…their focus at this time was no different from that of a normal soldier.

Made to run like idiots for the time being, they received collective punishments for absurd reasons and spent their time receiving enough verbal abuse from the instructor to short out their ears. It was the rite of passage for ordinary people to become soldiers. Till their bodies reacted before their minds to the instructor's commands, they would continue

doing this, and only this.

“You’re a lap behind, Warrant Officer Ikta Solork! Aren’t you embarrassed to be causing trouble for your friends?! You look like you’re dying with those eyes! You’re better off packing your things and going home!”

“No…that’s exactly what I want from you…”

“Did you say something?! I didn’t hear you!”

“Sir, yes sir.”

“Just what did I do wrong to deserve this?”

Ikta grumbled, not learning from his mistakes. They were eating heavily spiced stew from a large pot together with a light tandoori baked bread during their lunch break, which they had immediately after somehow making it through morning training. Irritatingly, the location was outdoors.

“I wonder, is it because I’m loose with women?”

“In any case, the Imperial Army uniform looks good on you, Warrant Officer Ikta.”

Yatori made her jab with a composed face. The entire group was dressed in sleeveless shirts and burnt brown pants. Officially, they’d add a jacket and a hat to that with a rank insignia on the left side of the chest. Even the spirits in their hip pouches were wearing red tiaras on their heads to signify their military employment. If the one who looked best wearing this army uniform were Yatori, then her counterpart would undoubtedly be Ikta. Not even counting appearance as an issue, though, it was too big for him.

“Munchmunch…. Hey Warrant Officer Ikta, if you’re not going to finish that I’m taking it.”

“My buddy Matthew, I’m waiting for this to cool. …Or should I say, because you might as well since you’re a wind spirit holder, it’d be great if you could give everyone a refreshing breeze. Hey, you Ikemen over there, too.”

As Ikta shamelessly made his request, Torway ordered his kind-hearted partner Safi to stir up the wind. Matthew’s wind spirit Tsuu also followed suit.

“T-that’s a grea~t help…! Do this every day- It’s so hot I could die~…”

Looking about as exhausted as Ikta, Haro unsteadily came into where the wind was blowing. Her partner, the water spirit Miru, was able to make ice, but since the amount he could produce in a single day was limited, she had been ordered by the instructor to save it and be ready for when an injured person appeared.

“Cheer up, Ik-kun, Haro-san. The schedule for the afternoon is group work and bow gun [1] shooting practice, and after is classroom lecture. Running around is pretty much limited to the marathon. And even that is much more enjoyable at night than it is now.”

“Was that supposed to cheer us up? Also, you said Ik-kun.”

Ikta angled Safi’s “wind tunnel” toward himself while speaking. Yatori huffed angrily at

him.

“Hey, no wind’s coming this way, is it? Don’t hog the breeze if you’re going to complain.”

“Hmph- to think that the Imperial Knight who also graduated top of her class can’t even allow another person to have some wind.”

“There’s a flaw[2] waiting wherever you hear reasoning, you know. —If you’re a chivalrous Imperial Knight, then naturally it’s ladies first- am I wrong, Ikta-kun?”

Countering with that, Yatori held Safi in her arms for a moment, and set him down on the ground so that the wind would strike her and Haro. As Ikta was wearily returning to his meal, in front of his eyes, three shadows suddenly appeared.

“Yo, blockhead Imperial Knight-sama. Hope you don’t mind that we’re a week late.”

Unlike that of Yatori and Matthew, a completely rotten sarcasm made its presence known. As Ikta blankly looked up at his scene partners, the faces he anticipated were lined up. The macho Agora, the bucktoothed Colsara, the bulgy-eyed Niira. Among those who passed in his year, they were a trio that hung out with each other from the very beginning.

“We prepared a special energy drug for ya, weakling Knight-sama. Hey, give us your bowl.”

A long, thin, wriggling object fell from Colsara’s hand, and fell into the bowl Ikta was holding. Haro, watching the situation with an uneasy feeling, gave a small shriek.

The thing squirming inside the sea of stew was a large insect with countless jointed limbs- a centipede.

“I heard that they dip this in wine and drink it in Kioka. Come on, try it.”

Agora folded his log-like arms and grinned broadly. Then, Ikta abruptly took on a serious expression, and took hold of a sharp rock lying around nearby. Niira, shaking where he stood, jumped up and lost his cool.

“W-w-what’s this?! Hey you, you wanna go?!?”

“Alright!”

Ikta threw the sharp rock at the centipede, which was waiting for a good time to flee outside the bowl.

Yellowish bodily fluids spattered everywhere, and the headless body of the insect writhed, displaying all the more vigor.

In the next scene, the trio, Agora, Colsara, and Niira, had their goosebumps raised out of horror. Ikta carried the centipede he killed to his mouth with his fingers, and slurped it down like vermicelli. It made a sound like the crunching of bird cartilage, and after chewing it for a while, he gulped it down completely.

“—Thanks for the meal. By the way, centipedes, you see, although they’re fine to eat, they have poison in their fangs so it’s dangerous if you don’t take the head off, you know. Treat me next time, too. Also, centipede wine is an urban legend. At the very least, it’s not a popular menu item in Kioka.”

While giving his nonchalant explanation, Ikta scarfed down the centipede-dipped stew. The trio had been watching him in blank amazement, but before long Agora turned his heel without a word and the other two followed suit.

While watching their queasy figures retreating, Yatori made a bitter smile and shrugged her shoulders.

“I guess there’s a limit to how much one doesn’t know one’s enemy. Even taking that that into account, though, trying to scare Ikta with an insect…”

“Well, it was my staple food at one point. Half of my body is made from insects.”

Ikta puffed up his chest as if he were proud. On one side, Haro was still glaring at the backs of the departed trio.

“That was horrible, just now. If that were me, I wouldn’t be able to control myself.”

“Well, it’s not as if that’s the first time it happened anyway. Isn’t it charming how childish their methods are?”

Ikta said it carefreely. Yatori, having known him a long time, understood. – This man was mysteriously generous toward the things called “childishness,” “immaturity,” and “the carelessness of youth.” It appeared that was the reason for his interest in Matthew. On the other hand, since he didn’t seem to like her mature behavior for her age, it was also something that agreed with his poor affinity with Her Highness, Chamille.

“Under normal circumstances, our ‘Order of Knights’ would be a target for jealousy. It would be troublesome to have those kind of people as our scene partners, so it’d be great for us if they concentrate their attacks on Ikta.”

“Yatori-san, isn’t that a bit…”

An overly direct comment escaped Torway. —Since the five of them, the members of the shipwreck, had received a medal and enrolled, they naturally became known as the “Order of Knights” by those around them. Of course, rather than with respect, it was a name riddled with jealousy and contempt, and there were those who denounced them as “the group that passed the Exam with the Third Princess’s connections.” Since that was true in a way, it was hard to make a rebuttal.

…Nonetheless, the larger half of why they focused their attacks on Ikta had to do with the person himself. Ikta, who had no desire to pass the Exam since the start, when compared those who passed and were the best of the best, fell even lower than inferior in terms of physical strength, and been magnificently standing in the way of those around him since the very start of training. He contributed no obvious interest in trying, so even sarcastically being called “blockhead Imperial Knight-sama” was justified.

Matthew, having completely satisfied his hunger, spoke while patting his round stomach, which hadn’t changed that much.

“Whaat? Ignoring those kind of people is best, you know. The weaker the dog, the louder it barks- right?”

“What you said does have a point.” “What you said has a point, you know.”

“Why the hell are you in sync like that!? You guys are too creepy!”

When Matthew inflated his cheeks and pouted, Haro also huffed. With this feeling, though there were various problems with their circumstances, the cast of the “Order of Knights” were at least getting along well.

They made it through group work and marksmanship training, and it was finally time for the indoor classroom lecture. As Ikta, completely exhausted, as collapsed on a classroom desk, there was the presence of someone sitting immediately next to him, and he was woken up from his dreaming.

“This seat. You don’t mind if I sit here, Warrant Officer Solork?”

She spoke while flipping her beautiful blonde hair. …Burnt brown lower garments and a white shirt, and a Warrant Officer rank insignia. No matter how she looked, it was the same outfit as Ikta’s, one for High Grade Military Officer Cadets, but the size of everything was extremely small. When he looked at the person herself, she was of an age where she might have been attending a Middle Grade Academy.

“…Neither the desk nor the chair belongs to me, so. Feel free to do whatever, ‘’Warrant Officer Chamille-sama’’.”

His voice was cold. —Originally, the Imperial Family receiving education in military affairs, considering that the army was an institution of the Katjvarna Empire in which the Emperor stood supreme, was not particularly an unnatural thing. There were two major peculiarities. Her Highness Chamille’s age of 12 years, and her admittance to the High Grade Military Academy in the same position as other Cadets.

Concerning her young age, it seemed that she had passed on account of her premature intelligent manner and some arm-twisting using her status as a member of the Imperial Family. Her entering the High Grade Military Academy as a Warrant Officer seemed to be part of a larger political measure devised to improve the image of the Imperial Family. —Although, that meant that one should keep in mind that the motives of the person herself were, again, ‘’something different’’.

At the same time Her Highness, the Princess, reached the seat, the instructor entered the classroom and the lecture began. At this moment, they hadn’t explored the contents of the lecture that deeply yet- it was a review meant to reaffirm their foundation in Tactics, which each of them had studied before coming to something like the High Grade Academy.

Both Ikta and the princess were equally bored. Around when the youth yawned for a seventh time, she boldly began writing a private message to her neighbor in the notebook [3] she was taking notes on.

—Is your life here okay? Just, it seems to me that you’ve gotten a bit skinnier.

Noticing that he was being addressed by the writing, Ikta also thought a bit and wrote a reply on his own notebook.

—Anyone would get skinnier whether they liked it or not, you know. Have you tried running as much as we do?

The princess, jabbed in a painful place, hummed in dissatisfaction. In actuality, she wasn’t “in the same position as other Cadets.” Though that might be the case in things like

Tactics, for the hard training, athletics and close quarters combat, an exclusive menu was put together for Her Highness, the Princess, by the instructors who had received directions from the Imperial Family. Ikta had made a cynical jab about that. Though objectively speaking, his attitude was rather immature….

—I can't take afternoon naps, I can't drink alcohol, I'm not allowed to get close to delectable females. My three great desires were splendidly destroyed. Tell me, what am I supposed to live for in a place like this?

His openly-stated complaints were listed one after the other. The princess sighed while moving her chalk.

—Before long, the three month period of basic drills will be over, and our education as military officers should officially begin. Now, everyone is a Warrant Officer in name only, but once we have subordinates our treatment would naturally change, right?

—What I want right now is my own room, not subordinates. With the three levels of beds in the dormitories, I can't bring along a lover.

—A-a woman… is that the only thing you have in your head? You'd get in trouble for saying that to me here, honestly.

—Oh, excuse me for that. I chose the wrong confidant. That's a difficult conversation to have with someone else's child.

At the sentence, which reeked of sarcasm, the princess's heart swelled with disgust and indignation. —It was always like this! Even though I was trying my best to be considerate and have a conversation, when it comes to him, this man won't open up his heart even a little bit! No matter how nicely I try to connect with him, the all he does is return with is that malicious sarcasm.

However, in relation to the fact that she bound Ikta to the military register by conferring the title of "Imperial Knight," Her Highness, Chamille, felt indebted to him. She also owed him a debt of gratitude for the two times she was rescued from a predicament. When she thought of that, however coldly she was treated, the princess couldn't bring herself to be angry at the youth.

Besides… while failing to make communication with him, her depressed feeling settled together with her anger in her chest. The princess didn't understand it too well. She still didn't have a friend to whom she was close enough to so that she could ask advice about her misfortunes and these kinds of problems.

"…in the middle of his military campaign, of which could it be said that the activities of the non-commissioned officers especially stood out? Warrant Officer Chamille."

"-!?"

A question suddenly came flying at her from the instructor, and Her Highness, the Princess, stood up while panicking. However, nothing followed that. No matter how brilliant she was, if she didn't hear the contents of the question, there was no way she could answer it.

"Page 123."

Ikta muttered quietly next to the incredibly embarrassed princess with a textbook in her hand. Realizing that it was a hint, she also quickly flipped to the page.

"…the Offensive of Avhelia?"

"That is correct. Please be seated."

The princess relaxed and sat back down in her seat. The skinny instructor turned a malicious eye toward her neighbor.

"Well then— please state the details and historical military significance of this fight. Warrant Officer Ikta Solork."

An obviously difficult question had made its way around to Ikta. This was also an everyday occurrence. He took every opportunity to show off his lack of effort, and as a result, he was disliked not only by those in his year and those above him, but even by a particular instructor.

However, this person, unyielding to the torments of his surroundings and continuing being disliked even now, was not normal. Ikta stood up while stifling a yawn, and began to show his true nature.

"… It is one aspect of the 'battle of Yaponik' which occurred in Year 788 of the Imperial Era, at the time of the Emperor's expedition to the far east Yaponik Island, which is currently territory of the Kioka Republic. The commander from the Imperial side was Captain Giorgo Irsim. He was a great commander who used his distinguished war service at this time as a chance to shoot up to the rank of general, and is presently enshrined as a military hero."

"Continue."

"The Offensive of Avhelia—more accurately, the 'Individual Offensives of the Avhelia Wetlands', when considering the norms of the time, had been begun from a strikingly disadvantageous state of affairs for the Empire. It was a critical moment in which the 800 soldiers of the independent battalion under Captain Irsim's direction were attacked from three directions, north, east, and west according to the Yaponik Army's Three-Battalion, 1600-Solider Plan and, failing to retreat immediately, were completely surrounded by twice as many forces.

"However, at a point where retreat would be the only option for a normal commander, Captain Irsim took the complete opposite action. In addition to making the soldiers under his command discard half of their provisions and airmortar cannons, which had become deadweight, and lightening the bodies of all his troops, he forced an advance which could be considered insane.

"His goal was simple. To deal with enemy soldiers closing in from three directions, north, east, and west, by 'fighting them one at a time before they merge'- that is, the Individual Offensive Strategy. Even if his entire forces were inferior to those of the enemy, if the enemy forces were broken up in three units, they were stronger than each of the enemy groups. If they fight against their enemy after they merge their forces, there is no doubt that they'd lose at once, but if they fight with the enemy three times in succession before that happened, then they'd win. Confident in that, Captain Irsim engaged in a series of

battles and ultimately acquired a dramatic victory as per his intentions."

The instructor's face distorted in an increasingly loathsome expression as Ikta spoke smoothly.

"It is commonly said that the military significance of this battle is that 'it created a precedent for a tactical victory reversing a strategic defeat'. Even if all outlooks are bleak, one can reverse the outcome if one can accumulate localized victories. To the present day, it has left an impact on the spirit of the Imperial Army, and 'Imitate Irsim!' has become a set phrase for times of encouraging inferior forces. –However, is that really the case?"

Strongly contradictory words intercepted the instructor's mouth, which moved to permit him to take a seat. The eyes of the students in the room turned to Ikta one after the other. By the time the princess happened to take notice, he was the focus of the area.

"I believe that having Irsim's victory function simply as the foundation of the army spirit is a waste. 'A tactical victory reversed a strategic defeat' is one aspect of the act, but for soldiers in the times to come, we must enter that act into calculations and develop tactics. Therefore, we shouldn't simply praise Captain Irsim's standplay here, we should read into the tactical superiority of which only he took notice.

"There are three places where Captain Irsim's forces were better compared to the Yaponik Army. First, unlike the enemy, who were divided into three units, his military forces were collected. Second, they were overwhelmingly light of foot compared with the enemy and superior in mobility. And third, due to their survey in advance, they had a thorough knowledge of the terrain of the Avhelia Wetlands. These three factors painted a much more realistic transition in the war in his mind than compared to the leaders of the Yaponik Army.

"If I put it simply. First, the leaders of the Yaponik Army saw 'the forces of allies and enemies in the Avhelia Wetlands' and had confidence in the superiority of their own army. But for Captain Irsim, he was able to read into 'where the enemy-ally forces were deployed in the Avhelia Wetlands at each point time'. As a result, the merits of both armies were reversed in his mind."

The students in the classroom barring none, including even the instructor at this point, were listening to Ikta's speech. …No, to be accurate there was just one exception. The fiery haired girl sitting in the front row hadn't even been listening until now.

"I wonder if you understand. Captain Irsim added a third criterion, 'the whereabouts of forces at each point in time' to the wars which until then had used only 'the location of battle' and 'the comparison of both forces' as material for a conclusion. He made the 2-dimensional battle evolve into a 3-dimensional battle- this is his true achievement, you see.

If we are to inherit his legacy, the leaders of the modern times can't look at a map aimlessly when they open one on the battlegrounds. Just as if they're picturing the board of blindfolded shogi game, they must imagine the forces moving around the top of the map in real time."

Judging that his prolonged speech had ended, Torway began applauding from beside the window. The other students, acting in accordance, even if it wasn't all of them, put their

hands together with a feeling of honest admiration. It's an ironic story, but for Ikta, it was good fortune that these people were his audience. The students in this place, having only passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam, had the elementary training to understand the value of his speech.

Responding to the applause by lightly waving his hand, as if he had been satisfied with it, Ikta sunk back into his chair like a puppet with its strings cut. His lifeless face, laid sideways on his desk, seemed to belong to a completely different person than earlier.

"However…" thought the princess. "It's irritating to acknowledge him, but I think I'd like to see more of the intelligence and energy he shows so randomly like this."

Ikta did occasionally show glimpses of talent during their classroom lectures, but in their training besides that, he was quite the dimwit. He was particularly bad at close-quarters combat and marksmanship. Let's excerpt one part of an episode that clearly shows that disastrous spectacle below.

"Warrant Officer Ikta, get the hell up! The enemy ain't waiting around for you in the middle of a fight!"

"Ahh, he didn't get to break his fall as he fainted that time. Let's wake him up now, shall we? –Here goes!"

As Ikta fainted, Yatori immediately came over and revived him. Confirming that he returned to his partner after getting up somehow or other, the instructor was satisfied and went to observe the others. But, however….

"…What's this? Even though he was just revived earlier, Warrant Officer Ikta collapsed again?" - "Ahh, he just took a vital blow to his stomach that time. Let's wake him up now, shall we? –Here goes!"

Yatori came and revived him a second time. Since he got up for the time being, the instructor relaxed and went to see the others. However, when he came back three minutes later, he was collapsed in the same manner again.

"…Oi, Warrant Officer Ikta's spitting foam from his mouth. Is he doing alright…?"

"Ahh, he went limp because he got caught in a stranglehold that time. Let's wake him up now, shall we? —Here goes!"

Yatori, coming for a third time, didn't let the youth rest in peace this time either. Ikta, barely getting up, tried to return to sparring with a blank face, but in the process, collapsed unexpectedly and began convulsing.

"W-warrant Officer Ikta!? We've got an injury- Medic!"

"Ahh, his muscles malfunctioned due to the side effects of the revival method that time. Let's wake him up now, shall we? Here-"

"Enough already! It's fine, just carry him to the medical office!"

Ikta left behind a legend as the man who fainted four times- three times by his partner- until the instructor had ordered a stop. Incidentally, it seems that Yatori also began to be addressed with "-san" by those in her year after that.

Again, there is another one of these story besides that one. The story of what happened during the marksmanship training with a bow gun. Since no one besides wind spirit holders can use an air shooter, this thing, which anyone could use, was a long-distance armament common for all soldiers, but….

"…Warrant Officer Ikta. Can you really see the target?"

"Of course I can see it. My eyes are at least that good."

"You flipped a coin ten times, and it landed on the wrong side each time. Well, I suppose it's also a question of chance."

"Whatever the case, I'll land 2 out of 5 shots. I've shot ten times until now, and they all missed, you see, so from now on, there should be an 'aftershock' in order to restore the statistical balance. Well, please see it for yourself. Since by my calculations, I'll definitely hit 5-6 times consecutively."

While making that declaration, Ikta turned the pulley, drew the bowstring, and nocked a new arrow. …But, this time, the arrow he aimed and fired at the target flew in a course away from the target again and stuck in the ground.

"…You missed again."

"Ehh, too bad."

"What happened to your calculations before?"

"I missed 11 consecutive shots. So I should hit 7-8 times consecutively…"

Not letting him finish his words, the instructor's fist slammed into the back of Ikta's head.

"This kinda crap isn't chance! Why don't you fix those 2 outta 5 shots odds of yours?!"

This is a good example of infuriating your superiors by picking a needless argument. It goes without saying that Ikta was forced into taking nothing but rigorous man-to-man training until he somehow produced an average accuracy rate.

As Ikta was imposing his presence on his surroundings- for better or for worse- the rest of the 'Order of Knights' were receiving their own individual training. Yatori was still aware of Torway as a rival as usual, but there was the difference in their targeted Division, and a chance for the two of them to compare their abilities hadn't come yet. Instead, since they were both fellow Air Gunner Soldiers, Torway and Matthew's association intensified.

The sound of compressed air being released overlapped countless times and rang across the outdoor shooting range. An air shooter, set up to enclose the spirit's entire body, aimed at a far off target, and fired. It was the shooting range for gathering the wind spirit holding students.

"…—Woosh, —woosh… thud!"

A bullet, casually aimed and fired, penetrated a central part of humanoid target 40 meters ahead of it. Even among the students bragging about their skill in marksmanship, Torway Remeon's technique was the best by far. Rather, his depth of knowledge concerning

marksmanship was just fundamentally different from that of other students.

“You hit again, huh… It’s frustrating, but with your skill, it seems like you could defeat the enemy’s commander.”

While huffing a sigh, Matthew put a bullet into his own air shooter. As much as he, hating to lose, had to acknowledge him, there was a distinct difference between their accuracy rates. The difference wasn’t so visible if it were 10 or 20 meters, but when the distance increased more than that, Matthew’s bullets slowly stopped reaching their mark.

“Thanks, Maa-kun. …Though even if I don’t go as far as to aim for a commander, being able to hit a far off target in itself is a great advantage. First, I think that I want to master that.”

Saying that, Torway fired another shot. The number of holes in the target didn’t increase. However, it wasn’t because he missed, it was because it pierced through the same hole as the one before it.

“It’s hasn’t been 100 years since the air shooter arrived to the battlefield, and its existence has actually displaced the Javelin Division as the main offensive division of the Army. I think that their dominance will still continue for a quite a while. The Remeon Family invented the Line of Battle Firearm Combat Tactic, but aside from that, I want to add a new page to ‘the history of guns on the battlefield’.”

“You talk big, don’t you? But, what exactly is this new page? Another gunner strategy?”

“It’s just a vague idea, so I guess it’s confidential for now. Ask me again next time, okay Maa-kun?”

When they completely used the bullets they were given, the “cease fire!” command came from the instructor. Taking that as a signal, Torway and Matthew removed the barrels from their wind spirits, stored Safi and Tsuu in their respective pouches, and formed a line together with the rest of the students.

“As of now, morning training is over! Take your lunch break- Dismissed!”

The students breathed a sigh of relief. After they ate until the start of afternoon lessons was their precious free time.

“It’s finally over. For now, let’s meet up with Ik-kun and the others in the cafeteria, shall we?”

“Somehow it’s like the ‘Order of Knights’ always lumps together, no? Well, for today we’re just hanging out.”

The two of them started walking in unison, but when they entered the shadow of the storehouse while taking a shortcut to the cafeteria, they ended up running into a large group of people who gathered there previously. They were about five older, slightly raspy-voiced upperclassmen officers smoking tobacco.

“…Ahh, what the hell’d you come for? This here’s a dead end.”

“A warrant officer rank insignia… meaning they’re newcomers to the High Grade Military Officer Course, am I right?”

“Are you guys baby chicklets? Oi, if you wanna go to the cafeteria, stop bein’ lazy and take the boardwalk.”

They broke into obnoxious laughter. It shouldn’t have been allowed for them to smoke tobacco there, but the nature of the upperclassmen-lowerclassmen relationship in the army was powerful to an unreasonable extent. In times like this, one had to surrender to one’s seniors.

“P-please excuse us! …Oi, let’s go back, Torway.”

Quick to understand, Matthew moved to turn around, but Torway didn’t move from where he stood.

“Torway? Come on, we gotta go.”

“…Y-yea…”

Torway had finally come to his senses, but his gaze was still turned to the center, going back and forth between the two upperclassmen officers. Maybe they noticed but… they turned suspicious eyes toward him, and finally grasped the situation.

“—Huh? What’s this, isn’t that Toruru?”

A strangely friendly voice rang out, and one of the upperclassmen officers stood up. He was a handsome, blue-eyed male. In addition to his eyes, the long hair on his head was also the same shade of light green as Torway’s. A wind spirit was stored in the pouch on his hip, but in addition to that, he was carrying an awfully large-caliber air shooter barrel on his shoulder. His rank was first lieutenant.

“Sariha-nii-sama , Sushura-nii-san…”

Torway called the names of his companions in a shaking voice. The young man called Sariha walked halfway over.

“It’s been a while, Toruru, you been doing alright? Hmm? No, I also just came back here from the Northern Stronghold today, you seee. I was thinking I’d go and say hi sometime tonight, but I didn’t have the time.”

While talking fluently, Captain Sariha slapped his younger brother’s shoulder with his right hand. Their physiques were just about the same, but Torway was currently shrinking in on himself like a borrowed cat.[4]

“…Nii-sama, that you were able to return to the capital safely is precious above all.”

“No, it was actually incredibly boring over there, ya know. I’m jealous of those guys over at the Eastern Stronghold who got to fight with the Kioka Army. …Uhh, are you Toruru’s friend?”

As he had the conversation turned on him, Matthew nodded reflexively.

“I seee I see. –Ah, I’m called Sarihasrag Remeon- I’m this guy’s older brother so far as it goes. That bigheaded-shorthaired fellow is Sushuraf Remeon. Would you tell us your name if that’s alright?”

“Warrant Officer Matthew Tetdrich. I’m humbled to meet you, Captain Sarihasrag Remeon-dono.

“Ahhh~ Stop it stop it! You don’t need the Captain, the dono, or my full name, Sariha is fine.”

Huhh- Matthew tilted his head. A too friendly superior was also difficult to handle.

“But hey hey you see~ I also kinda remember your full name, ya know. You’re one of the five guys who saved the Third Princess and received the title ‘Imperial Knight’ aren’tcha? I could recognize Torway and the Igsem’s eldest daughter right off the bat, but I couldn’t put my finger on the names other than those, ya see. Huhh~ I see, so you’re Matthew-kun.”

After scrutinizing Matthew with a shameless gaze, Sariha suddenly raised his head.

“Well, thanks buddy. Thanks a lot. Let me say my thanks as his older brother.”

“…Huh? Uh, no, why?”

“For this and that. He slowed you guys down, am I right? Our little brother.”

Torway’s shoulder shook slightly. When Matthew stood baffled, not understanding what was said, Sariha continued his non-stop one-sided conversation.

“It’s always been that way, ya know. This guy, ya see, he’s weak when it comes to bloodshed or unexpected situations. I don’t know if he cracks under pressure or what, he just becomes completely useless. You guys’d have your hands full just protecting the Princess, so it must’ve been stressful to also bring this kid back safely, am I right? And to think that you’d have been better off tossing him away before coming back, too.”

This time, Matthew was at a loss for words. The taste was too terrible for a joke, but having said that, if it were serious, he really couldn’t believe that those were words an older brother could say in front his younger brother.

“N-no, Torway really did stick it out, you know…? He acted calmly after the ship sunk, and there was the time after that when he fired at a Kioka soldier—“

On the contrary, he remembered how he himself couldn’t move, and as a deep-rooted inferiority complex awakened within him, Matthew’s mouth froze.

Sariha interpreted his silence with a different meaning.

“Really, you don’t need to go that far to cover up for him. I completely understand that this thing shuffles along uselessly. –Do you know? My kid brother, ya see, ‘’can’t land a bullet when the target is close up’’.”

“…Hah? When the target is close up…?”

“He’s okay with the targets used for training, but when the target becomes a moving enemy, he’s completely useless, see? He can’t bring down a rabbit five meters in front of him. He’s a helpless scaredy cat. –Isn’t that right, Torway?”

Torway, with his eyes downward cast, didn’t answer. Given how things played out, he didn’t have anything to stop Sariha’s abusive words.

“This guy can probably shoot the far targets skillfully in training, right? But ya see, at the end of the day, it’s still just his desire to be a little farther apart from the enemy. …That’s why, Matthew-kun. I’ll give you a warning from the goodness of my heart- you should

never trust this guy in an actual battlefield. If things take a tiny turn for the worse, there's no doubt he'll abandon his allies, his subordinates, his whatever, and just make a break for-"

''"I'm not making a break for anything!"''

An exclamation similar to a scream came rushing out of Torway's mouth. Then, Sariha, interrupted in the middle of his speech, returned his gaze to his younger brother. His usual friendly smile was now oppositely eerie.

"Hey, Toruru. ''–Just now, I was talking, wasn't I''?"

With just that one phrase, Torway's lips closed a second time. It was a spectacle that showed the power relationship between the brothers.

"Why're you just cutting into the middle of my story? Just who do you think you are? Somebody important?"

"…I-I'm… just…"

"I'm what? What did you say you were? Say it clearly!"

The voice beside him was lighthearted, but strong fear surfaced on Torway's face even though he burst out before. He was completely overpowered. His existence was similar to a piece of stencil work, as if he were being carved with terror of his older brother. –However,

"Oh, I'll say it clearly for you, Sadist Ikemen. I'm uncomfortable just looking at Nii-sama's face. I get a headache just hearing your voice. Compared to Onii-sama, pigs from the livestock pen are much cleaner and more charming. If only Onii-sama weren't alive, the world would be harmony itself. Ahh, Onii-sama, really, it'd be best if your face would explode due to a strange disease of unknown origin as soon as possible."

The atmosphere thickened. Of course Torway's mouth hadn't moved. The insults that seemed to tumble out came down from from above his head.

"According to the Scriptures of Alderah. –Black-hearted ikemen receive no mercy for extenuating circumstances!"

While inventing a proverb, the owner of the voice jumped down from a tree branch. The one who landed right next to the Remeon brothers was a, black-eyed youth with slovenly messy black-hair in an army uniform shirt—it was Ikta Solork hugging his partner, the light spirit Kusu, in both arms.

"I-Ik-kun—Ahh!?"

"I'm tellin' you not to call me Ik-kun!"

A flick to the forehead bounced off Torway's brow. On the other side, Sariha squinted and suddenly stared at the intruder.

"…Toruru, is this your friend?"

"You're wrong, I'm an Imperial Knight who just happens to be passing by. My mission is to return the rampaging ikemen of the world to dust."

Ikta spouted his nonsense and struck a pose. From those details, Sariha guessed at his scene partner's identity.

"Imperial Knight… If this guy here is Matthew-kun, I see so that means that you're Ikta Solork-kun."

"Silence, Sadist Ikemen. I'm about to puke at that 'I'm your superior but I'm also friendly, aren't I?' aura of yours."

"Ahaha, that's harsh. But, well, wait a minute, Ikta-kun. I want to get along with you. I also owe you for taking the trouble to look after my little brother for me, right?"

Seeking friendship, Sariha stuck out his right hand. Then, however, Ikta meaninglessly took on airs after a long pause and pretended to accept the handshake, catching him in his trap. There was a fresh centipede in his closed hand.

"Gyah!? W-wh-wha….!"

"Relax, its head is taken off."

Ikta stuck out his chest as though this were a professional's work. As Sariha flung the centipede away and furiously rubb his hand to get rid of the sensation left in his palm, he glared at Ikta charged with hostility.

"…What, you, are you tryin' to pick a fight with me?"

"More precisely, I've been picking fights with all the ikemen in the world since the moment I was born into it."

"Are you making fun of me? If you're joking, I'm going to be really angry, ya know."

When Sariha's voice took on a menacing tone, even Matthew, who had been spectating their conversation until now, stood up. The other upperclassmen officers followed suit, and before he knew it Ikta was surrounded by five men.

"Apologize. Even now, I'll forgive you with just an 'I'm sorry, I got ahead of myself'."

"Hmph. Among ikemen, there are the ikemen I can forgive, and those who I can't. Our Torway is somehow or other the former kind, and you are exactly the latter. Dismissal of an intermediate appeal upon the trial of the first offense of your face. Explode without a stay of execution!"

Not a second after Ikta finished his speech in a ringing voice, Sushura's rock-like fist sunk into his stomach. He fell, buckling at the knees, without even the time to scream, and moreover, Sariha's kick rushed on to deliver the final blow.

"You're still a mongrel, you brat. Were you so excited about that conferring of decorations that your brain turned funny? Huh?"

A hard shoe sole tread on Ikta's temple. The other officers grinned and crowded around Matthew, who moved to interfere.

"Friendship is nice, isn't it? But I won't say anything bad so just leave it. When that person[5] snaps, it's all the same to him. He'll hit anyone until his head cools down. Just hang here with us. Alright?"

“P-please move aside! Ikta are you okay…!?”

Even when Matthew shouted, on the other side of the human blockade, Sariha’s foot didn’t stop kicking at Ikta. However, his gaze did momentarily shift toward his younger brother, who was standing motionless with a ghastly pale face.

“Look at that, it’s just like I said. His friend’s bein’ beat up right in front of his eyes and he doesn’t even have the guts to get angry at me. He’s nothing more than a coward. I’m telling you he really doesn’t know true friendship, right, Ikta-kun?

“…Ha-haha. Seems like you have triple handicap aside from your face, no? Sadistic, black-hearted, and stupid to boot.”

“What’d you say!?”

“Neanderthals hit when they feel like hitting. Soldiers attack properly when they need to attack. Torway knows the difference between those really well. This is my move-restraining myself and waiting for an opportunity, you see?

“By the way, Captain Sarihasrag. Let me ask you something, do you know the definition of a war of attrition in tactics study?”

“…?”

“It’s ‘avoiding a decisive battle and stalling for time, a battle fought to wait for a chance to come’. Restraining yourself in moments when you just want to charge out is a requirement for great commanders, you see. If people with short tempers like yours are commanders, they’d be drawn by the enemy’s provocations, get completely surrounded when they dash out, then that’s the end of them. Idiots who mistake recklessness for courage and then laugh at other people’s cowardice are ridiculous.”

Sariha became increasingly frenzied and kicked at Ikta, who didn’t stop talking even at this point.

“You’re gonna lecture me as you grovel on the ground and lick dirt?! How the hell do you explain the current situation with that logic!? You, Imperial Knight-san getting beaten to a pulp after self-importantly giving a speech in the middle of enemy territory!”

“Oof, Gah! …I-I thought of something good. I’ll only say it once so listen closely.”

“…You’re still fucking mumbling?!”

“Ahh, language. Neanderthals hit when they feel like hitting, soldiers attack when they need to attack. …And it’s not whether he’s an ape or a military man, Ikta Solork is ‘’saying all he needs to say when he wants to say it!’’”

The moment he finished saying that, Ikta turned his face-down body right-side up, and had Kusu, who he’d been shielding and hugging to his chest, fire a High Beam as a counterattack. In addition, having gotten up, he flung sand which he clutched in his palm toward Sariha’s blinded eyes.

“…Guahh! Th-this fucker!”

“Alright, the ikemen is making a good face. Let’s see, maybe I’ll refrain from interfering anymore.”

Ikta gloated while brushing the dirt off his clothes. The other four besides Sariha immediately turned and rushed at him, but the youth, without panicking or losing his cool, made and about-face and starting walking,

“And touch. Do your best, Imperial Knight-san.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I guess I’ll take care of it, Imperial Knight-san.”

He clapped hands with his fiery-haired friend who appeared there, and left what was to come entirely in her hands. [6]

“…!? You’re… Yatorishino Igsem?!”

Sariha, having brushed the sand from his face, glared at the girl who newly appeared. At the echo of the name he brought to his mouth, Sushura and the other officers showed a glimpse of nervousness. Matthew and Torway’s shared the same surprise.

“…Ikta, who are these people?”

“The pleasant brothers of the Remeon Family, and three punks following them.”

“Ahh, Captain Sarihasrag Remeon and Lieutenant Sushura Remeon. …I’m pleased to meet you both. I am called Yatorishino Igsem. It is a privilege to make your acquaintance.”

She greeted them with a salute saturated with insincerity. Yatori went on before Sariha could say anything.

“From what I saw, it seemed that you were having Ikta from my year act as your sparring partner. With this line up, I’d think you’re ganging up on him in a many-on-one, correct? It looked like rather tough training, though.”

Sariha and the others were left at a loss for words. Understandably, it was difficult to say anything for a lynching as the end result of an argument. Since the justification provided by their scene partner was exactly what they needed, after thinking a little, they nodded vaguely.

“I knew that was it. –Thank goodness. It appears that there’s no need to call an instructor over, Your Highness, the Princess.”

Yatori turned behind her and called out. From the shade of the storehouse building, the form of a small-framed girl bringing along a tall female soldier appeared. Beautiful blonde hair extended to her hips was blown by the wind, and captured the eyes of Sariha and the others.

“Is that so? Then, I am also relieved. To think that interaction between fellow soldiers is so violent a thing.”

Her nobility revealed itself in her gentle tone. The five of them, Sariha and the others, finally realized whose presence they were in.

“W-would you be Her Highness, the Princess…. Th-third Princess Chamille…?”

One of the followers asked with a stiff face. The rumor of a whimsical noble who entered the Military Officer Academy in the same position as an ordinary student had also reached their ears. The princess, standing in line with Haro, made an awkward salute.

“It is as you say, but my current position is a mere Warrant Officer. Excuse me for interrupting your valuable training.”

“N-no, that’s…”

As the five of them were fumbling for words, Yatori made her next move.

“Your Highness, the Princess—No, Warrant Officer Chamille, you shouldn’t apologize. I’m at fault for observing their training from afar and mistaking it for a fight. Would you let me take responsibility?”

“Is that so? If that is what you say then it is well.”

Yatori, authorized by the princess, began walking toward Sariha and the others. Spreading her feet shoulder width apart, she took a firm stance with her center of gravity in her torso.

“Ikta. What are the sparring rules?”

“Hmm… five-on-one down, also a manhunt, I guess.”

“Understood. Then, I, Yatorishino Igsem, shall serve as his substitute for your sparring partner. Please continue.”

“Uh, no, wait just—“

The moment one of the followers choked and stretched out his arm, Yatori dove at his unprotected chest and, not yielding any to any resistance, flung her partner away. The young man, hit the ground on his back with a crash, and, not getting up, opened and closed his mouth like a fish shot out of water.

“W-wait, I-“ “Sparring with a girl—“

The following two also tried to say something or other, but didn’t make it. Two clouds of dust flew up, and the three men who were utterly defeated by Yatori were lying sideways at Yatori’s feet.

Even without the two blades, nearly everyone who saw the Igsem’s cold Close-Quarters Combat Tactic held their breath. Only Ikta casually blew out a whistle.

“…You’re pretty full of yourself.”

Among the remaining Remeon brothers, the one whose fighting spirit ignited was the big-built Sushura. Tossing his large air shooter to the ground, he took a stance to tackle the cheeky daughter of the Igsem Family with all his strength. Yatori also grinned slightly and moved to close the distance between them, but-

“Stop, Sushura! That’s enough!”

Sensing the disadvantage of the situation, Sariha’s roar stopped the two of them on the verge of a brawl.

“…Haha. No, I expect nothing less, Yatorishino-kun. I’m relieved. It seems that even your generation hasn’t lost its touch with the Igsem’s Close Quarters Combat Tactic.”

“No, I am honored. It is no more than a disgrace to your eyes, Maj…. Captain Sarihasrag.”

Noticing the sarcasm in her small slip of the tongue, Sariha clenched his fist while

wearing a stiff smile. …Though Sariha's rank was Captain, it hadn't changed for five years. Sarcasm as if to say, "you still haven't become a Major yet?" was mixed into Yatori's words.

"…That, that's enough sparring. Sorry for making you join us."

Exchanging looks with Sariha, Sushura nodded obediently and picked up the bodies of their followers who were knocked out by Yatori one after the other. Unfazed by the weight of three bodies- this was the fearsome superhuman strength of the second son of the Remeon Family.

"Well then, Your Highness, Princess Chamille, we shall take our leave here. We wish you well."

The brothers saluted in accordance with etiquette and moved to leave, but the moment they passed Ikta's sideways body, Sariha murmured with all his murderous intent. "… Don't think this is over."

When their two figures disappeared behind a corner, as if his nervousness dissolved at that point, Ikta folded his knees and flopped on his back. Torway was also freed from his older brothers' spell, panicked, and rushed to his friend's side.

"Ik-kun, are you hurt!? Oh god, no broken bones…!?"

"…My stomach hurts…my back hurts…"

With his energy from when he hurled insults at Sariha disappeared somewhere, Ikta whimpered in a weak, tearful voice. Haro immediately came over and began a medical examination.

"…Hm, it's just bruising and internal bleeding. It'll be fine if we just keep it cold. Miru, make some ice."

Being addressed, the water spirit Miru suddenly nodded and spit out three lumps of ice from the 'water spout' in his torso in a size which someone could hold snugly in one hand. She quickly wrapped the lumps, which started melting right from the moment they touched the open air, in bandages and tied them to the especially swollen parts out of the several injured areas.

"You don't need to worry, Torway. Ikta is tougher than he looks."

"That's…, But because of me, he was beat up like that by Onii-sama and the others…"

"…Because of me? Oi, don't go misunderstanding anything, Ikemen. Listen here, I just wanted to get revenge for being disturbed from my sleep by that Sadist Ikemen's annoying voice. You can see my bed up in that tree can't you, look."

When he directed his gaze in the direction Ikta pointed out, there was a commercial-style bed established on a thick branch in a tree 10 meters from the ground. Even his long-time friend Matthew was dumbfounded at this.

"Are you one with the clouds or something….? Don't you think that you're going to fall and die?"

"One point lesson for my buddy Matthew. Ikta is unexpectedly skilled at climbing trees."

“It’s not just here, you know. This guy has expanded his nest to the lowest two in the center of the base. …Today I was wondering if he weren’t playing hooky from the morning’s classroom lecture and sleeping around this area, so I tried stopped by on my way back from training, and sure enough he was.”

Yatori sighed. While staring at Ikta, who was whistling innocently, the princess spoke.

“…You picked a fight with your several scene partners exactly because you anticipated that Yatori would move accordingly. You assumed that we would then give our help. Am I correct, Solork?”

“My my… Hey~ Haro, as her senior, would you teach some fine words to the princess who said those things so well?”

“Huh? Umm… I wonder what you mean…. …Ah, some things are better left unsaid?”[7]

The princess’s face reddened at her own correct guess and verbal faux pas, and she fell into silence. Haro, noticing that she made her own error, panicked along with Yatori and tried to cover up for it. Whenever it came to this princess, anything Ikta did turned into bullying.

“Oi, Torway.”

Ikta, resisting the pain and standing up, unexpectedly called the young man in front of him by his name.

“The definition of a war of attrition. Can you tell me?”

“….Uhh…? That is, Ik-kun, you just….”

“Who cares just say it.”

“Y-yea…. It’s ‘avoiding a decisive battle and stalling for time, a battle fought to wait for a chance to come’, right?”

Torway said it word-for-word without hesitation. Ikta snorted and turned his back.

“If you can say it then it’s fine. You’ll be fine later as long as you do exactly that, you see. …Well, that is the hardest thing to do, though.”

Those words pierced harder and deeper into the young man’s chest than their speaker intended.

Interspersed with various accidents such as those, the three month basic training period passed quickly, and at long last Ikta and the others started to receive training as full-fledged military officers.

“The 32 who passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam, listen well! Each and every one of you will now be assigned one at a time to organized Imperial Army platoons of 40 soldiers! Though they may be training platoons, they are full-fledged, legitimate units! Accept this responsibility with care!”

The instructor gave an explanation to the students collected in the plaza. Their hopeful gazes gathered just now.

“The separation of soldiers to each respective Division will differ! Wind spirit holders to the Air Gunner Platoons, fire spirit holders to the Incineration Platoons- each you will mostly be deployed as such. For the sake of command, first get in your head how to tell apart the characteristics of your own unit!”

After continuing to speak about preparedness as a commander for one scene, the instructor finally called out to the soldiers waiting in a neighboring plaza, and began the ceremony of assigning a 40-soldier platoon to each warrant officer.

The ones with hopes weren’t just the warrant officers- it seemed that the privates who would enter under their command were the same, and as the names of the new platoon leaders were being read aloud, they gave small elated or disappointed reactions.

“Warrant Officer Yatorishino Igsem, I entrust you with the First Training Platoon of the Incineration Division! It is a gateway through which successive generations of Igsems have passed without exception. Show us some masterful leadership!”

“I humbly receive this appointment.”

Once Yatori received her commission from the instructor, the soldiers who became her subordinates hailed her with wildly enthusiastic cheers of joy. Even under normal circumstances, the Igsem name was widely known, but in these three months she was evaluated as an excellent warrant officer. Now especially, Platoon Yatori was number one unit in popularity which everyone was dying to enter.

“Warrant Officer Torway Remeon, I entrust you with the First Training Platoon of the Air Gunner Division! It is also the unit formerly commanded by your older brother, Captain Sarihasrag. We’re expecting you to become a great commander who won’t disgrace the Remeon Family name!

“…I humbly receive this appointment.”

He was in a complex mental state after being brought under comparison to his brother, but again Torway was hailed with great cheers of joy from the subordinates who entered under his command. Compared to the appointments of the two names that followed, Matthew and Haro, the difference in heat was clear. Many of the warrant officers couldn’t help but feel uneasy- weren’t they receiving defective greetings from their precious subordinates?

The Incineration soldiers, the Air Gunner soldiers, the Medic soldiers- Ikta’s appointment came around last. The group he was responsible for, being a light spirit holder, was the last Division, which was unpopular with soldiers due the plainness of taking supporting role.

“Warrant Officer Ikta Solork, I entrust you with the Third Training Platoon of the Illumination Division!”

“I humbly receive this appointment.”

Ikta answered in a slightly monotone voice. …However, the real show started there.

After receiving his commission, when he walked toward the soldiers with a stupid smile, he was hailed with a frighteningly heavy silence. It wasn’t simple disappointment, countless gazes tinged with hostility pierced through his entire body.

“Congratulations on your appointment as platoon leader, Warrant Officer Ikta Solork.

Please lead us well.”

The female soldier one step forward of her allies’ line, contrary to her polite tone, glared at Ikta with harsh eyes from below her hat. She was a little short compared to Haro, but she was still tall at 170 centimeters. Her rank insignia was one for sergeant major. Meaning, it seemed that she was largely serving as the platoon leader until Ikta’s appointment. Her age was approximately 20 years, and her partner was of course a light spirit. I would’ve liked for her to be a bit more ripe, but her sense of worldly wisdom also meets my tastes- thought Ikta absentmindedly.

“No, I look forward to working with you. –By the way, Sergeant Major, your name is?”

Ikta asked innocently enough, but in that moment, her hostility developed into murderous intent.

“…If you want my name, then shouldn’t you already know it, Warrant Officer?”

“Huh? No way, have we met somewhere before?”

File:Alderamin v01 217.png

…she glared at the superior officer in front of her with her newly revealed face.

As Ikta said that, the temperature of the soldiers’ gazes around him slowly dropped. Then, her face twitching, the female sergeant major took off her hat and glared at the superior officer in front of her with her newly revealed face.

“I am Sergeant Major Suuya Mittokalif. My partner is the light spirit Yoki. –It’s been two years since we’ve met like this, hasn’t it, Warrant Officer Solork? ‘’In the past, you were quite obliged to my mother.’””

The sound of her name called up old memories, and Ikta opened his eyes wide. Her face, strong with competitive spirit, was a little less tall before, but her curly brown hair and her freckles remained from the past.

“Suuya Mittokarif…wait, could you be, Amishiya’s daughter…?”

As Ikta timidly confirmed it, Sergeant Major suddenly brought her face closer.

“Yes, I am her daughter. –However, Warrant Officer Solork. Would you not use my mother’s first name with such familiarity again? Since your social standing is no higher than a married woman’s fellow adulterer.”

“””The daughter of a past partner in adultery?”””

In the cafeteria where they had gathered for their lunch break, the cast of the ‘Order of Knights’ were shocked at Ikta’s report.

“You say adultery, but my courtship hadn’t reached that point yet. Ahh hell- why’d we have to meet again here of all places…?”

“W-wait, Ikta-san, you’re 17 right now, right!? I mean, just how old…!?”

Haro hit upon a reasonable question. Ikta folded his arms and thought a little.

“That was when I was in the fourth year of Middle Grade Academy so… 14 years? No, I

might actually have turned 15…”

“How old was your partner?! Isn’t the daughter in question older than you are!?”

“Ah, I remember that clearly. At that time Amishiya was 42 years old. I wonder if she’s doing okay right now.”

Matthew opened his mouth in amazement at the details the youth mentioned casually, and even Haro became lightheaded.

“Th-the difference between your ages is 28 years…? That’s practically the range for parent and child!”

Yatori, the only one who was not perturbed, caught Haro as she fainted and collapsed in her chair. Next to her, Her Highness Chamille, who ended up imagining the contents of his story in reality, was looking down with a red face.

“Forgetting age, I can’t praise you for coercing your partner into adultery. Don’t tell me you were aware of it when you did it?”

“Of course I didn’t know when I did it. My taste for older women is generally accepted by myself and others, but I don’t make it a habit to steal other people’s wives. Amishiya herself said that she split from her husband, and I was invited to her house countless times, so there’s no way I could have thought she was someone’s wife or anything…”

The story was progressing in an increasingly fishy direction. Her Highness, Chamille’s face was turning scarlet to the point that it seemed steam might come out. The excitement was too strong for a 12 year old girl, but Ikta didn’t care about that kind of thing.

“Ahh, come to think of it, we were at her house when I was exposed…. Suuya[8] came back home without announcing the date. That was a surprise because she got really angry, that girl. First she drove me out, then she cross-examined Amishiya, and she even called back her father from a business trip…it seems they having a big heated discussion and about to attack each other.”

“That’s an example of reaping what you sow. It’s natural for you to be blamed, isn’t it?”

“Well, I’m not making any excuses. Since, when I was called by Suuya after the family council came to a pause, the last thing I was told is, ‘I’ll never forgive you. Don’t show your face in front of my mother again.” I complied with that…but I was relieved that the Mittokalif household survived without disintegrating.”

Ikta, taking a breath and sipping his tea, was faced with cold looks from the formation of females around him. Normally, one would be unable to endure being in the middle of this atmosphere, but he bore it magnificently with seeming nerves of steel.

“Haha… by the way, what am I gonna do? Somehow it seems like this story is widely known among all the soldiers in my platoon, you see. It’s my first day on the job, and it already doesn’t seem like anyone will listen to what I say.”

“Please deal with it yourself. There’s not even a millimeter margin for sympathy.”

Yatori cut him down with a single stroke. Haro and Matthew also nodded wordlessly in agreement.

“My friends are so cold to me…. I got it, okay, I won’t rely on people like you anymore.”

While on the verge of seemingly fake tears, Ikta stood up from his seat with his empty food plate in his hand. Torway and the princess, who’d refrained from commenting until now, promptly moved to go after him, but Yatori stopped them.

“Your Highness, the Princess, please stay as you are. Torway, you, too, please stop going after him.”

“…? Wh-Why, Yatori? Even Solork is strangely troubled…”

“Ever since we first met, I’ve only been helped out by Ik-kun. I also want to be of use…”

“I thought that you two would say that. Helping and spoiling are similar but different, correct? The matter this time is a situation completely brought on by his own carelessness. He has the obligation to deal with it himself, concerning the details of the trouble as well, it’s not something outsiders should stick their heads into.”

The sound logic made the two of them silent. Yatori, seeing their condition, smiled wryly and added a revision.

“…I suppose I phrased it badly. What I wanted to say is that there is simply no need to worry. Well, just see how things go from afar for a little while. You’ll understand the price of worrying soon. –If he’s the type of man who’d be at a loss for a way out in this kind of situation, then Ikta Solork wouldn’t be here to begin with.”

“—Stop! Everyone, left!”

A sharp female voice echoed across the plaza. Under the blazing sun, forty pairs of military shoes forcefully tread on the solid earth, and Platoon Ikta, commanded by Sergeant Major Suuya, continued marching in line.

“Hmm- her skill is decent.”

However, as for the platoon leader who was supposed to be taking command, he was sitting alone on a small hill and watching the condition of his subordinates. This wasn’t his usual laziness, but because he had been boycotted by the soldiers.

“What should I do~?”

Ikta murmured while scratching his head with one hand. As a result of the infamy Suuya popularized, the soldiers’ good will toward him was either zero or in the negatives. Before they started this training, she told him this herself.

“It’s fine if you don’t do anything, Warrant Officer Solork. Since the soldiers will move well enough with my direction.”

It seemed that she had no intention at all of working under her original duty as assistant to the platoon leader. Thus, Ikta had involuntarily become an ornament on a hill. Well, but it’s easy, so this in itself was not too bad.

“Still, considering my position, the minimum is the responsibility to supervise, right… For their sake as well.”

A sigh came out. Ikta was forced to become a soldier against his will as a result of Her Highness, Chamille’s arrangements, but those circumstances had no connection to his

subordinates. He was thinking about waiting for an opportunity and escaping the army, but in the time until then, he wanted to at least properly supervise his blameless subordinates.

"…My my. It seems that I have one one-hundred-millionth of the sense of responsibility as Lieutenant General Rikan did."

His heart set with resolution, Ikta lifted his heavy body and came off the hill. –A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Even if progressing to a commanding officer all of a sudden is impossible, today, let's at least somehow progress to a talking ornament.

There were two men with a telescope watching Ikta from afar attempting communication with his subordinates in his natural cheeky manner. A handsome young man with light green hair, and a giant with a height close to two meters. They were the Remeon brothers.

"—Haha, serves you right. Oi, Sushura, can you see this? He's being ignored by the soldiers."

"…"

"How the hell is that mess an Imperial Knight? It's obvious that him crossing the border from Kioka territory and returning alive was just good luck. That guy fucking made me listen to that ridiculous babbling…"

Sushura, as silent as a rock, listened to the abuse Sariha muttered over and over.

…To tell the truth, he wasn't the type to hold a grudge as much as his older brother was, and he had already stopped caring about Ikta. Even for this act which resembled peeping, he was just making his brother look good and tagging along.

"Ahh shit- just remembering it makes me nauseous. That's right, speaking of cheeky, there's also Toruru. It'd be great if he'd just shut up and listen to what I say like he used to, but after hanging out with that weirdo he fucking went and turned rebellious. Now that it's come to this, we gotta get those two and make 'em understand their place, am I right? You're with me on this, right, Sushura?"

"…"

In contrast to Sushura's silence, Sariha went on indefinitely. A senior instructor who casually happened to pass by asked a question to the two of them.

"…Is that Captain Sarihasrag over there? I see, so you've also come back from the Northern Stronghold."

Sariha, addressed in conversation, immediately removed his eye from the telescope and saluted the instructor. When in front of his superior officer, his attitude when badmouthing his sickening scene partners changed completely- his expression tensed and his tone also became courteous.

"It has been a while, Lieutenant Colonel Kuurij. It is good to see that you are unharmed, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Hm, it's been three years, hasn't it? First Lieutenant Sushuraf, you're also putting on a nice face. However, what are you looking at by taking out a telescope?"

“Ha- we were checking the condition of our juniors in the High Grade Military Officer Course. It seems that they just finished their foundational drills and were entrusted with platoons, and as their seniors, we were curious about various things.”

“I see, I’m familiar with that. I also went through some trouble the first time I had subordinates.”

The instructor reminiscing with far off eyes suddenly looked at the Remeon brothers as if he remembered something.

“…That reminds me. You two, if you’re that concerned with your juniors, how about you act as a guide and train them?”

“Hah…? But, we aren’t instructors…”

“No, that’s not it. Even you guys remember, right? After you were entrusted with platoons, practice to cultivate a sense of commanding in an actual battle was held from time to time. They’re sham battles where the exemplars use paint fluid, but how about serving as the new recruits’ opponents? -is what I meant.”

—Sariha widened his eyes, and his jaw hung with joy. This was a godsend.

“Most certainly, I would love to participate. When would the first practice be?”

“It’s about a month from now, but that’s when we’d arrive to the location, and there might be some time until the sham battle. Your unexperienced juniors would surely be anxious. You don’t mind?”

“Not at all- everyone is unexperienced in the beginning. …By the way, are the juniors we would be fighting random?”

“Is there a new recruit you’ve got your eyes on? Certainly, there are a few more interesting ones this year compared to the others. If you have a preference, then say so. I’m sure that they’ll appreciate you participation in their practice.”

Sariha, bestowed with the heaven-sent ability to choose, listed five names without any hesitation. The instructor smiled, showing his teeth.

“Haha, I see. Taking the entire ‘Order of Knights’- you guys have guts, don’t you?”

The instructor didn’t notice the dark sentiment lurking behind Sariha’s fresh smile at all.

A day approximately one month after the warrant officers in the High Grade Military Officer Course were entrusted with platoons.

In the lounge of the barracks, Matthew came gasping to where the five Ikta, Yatori, Torway, Haro, and Her Highness Chamille were polishing their countermeasure against the test that was prodding at their minds. The cast of the “Order of Knight” turned their heads at his clearly panicked acting.

“In such a hurry- what’s the matter, Matthew? How about you drink some water and calm down first?”

“I-I apologize, Your Highness, the Princess. Thank you…”

After taking a sake cup from the princess's hand, and draining it in one gulp, Matthew opened his mouth again.

"—Something terrible is gonna happened. I'm not sure we're coming back in one piece…"

"In one piece… s-somehow, that's not very peaceful, is it? What's going on?"

"The program for the practice we're participating in was released on the bulletin board. The date is set for five days from now, but that's not important. The problem is the details. It seems that the six platoons are going to march divided into two groups to the location about 30 kilometers to the southwest of here, then hold a mock battle using paint fluid, but…"

"Marching training and mock battles? It doesn't seem very easy for our first training."

"I'm saying, this isn't the time to be saying such careless things! The six platoons that are going to be split to fight are, on one side mine, Ikta's, and Torway's units! On the other side, Yatori, Captain Sarihasrag, and First Lieutenant Sushura's units!"

Surprise caught them all. Yatori, listed with an unexpected pair, opened her eyes wide.

"What, so I'm alone in a different camp? The Remeon brothers must like me quite a lot then."

"Yatori, that's only just for now. I mean, normally his two older brothers wouldn't even look at you…"

Torway was startled by Ikta's grinning mutter, but fortunately, it didn't reach Yatori's ears. Her personality in front of men was something of her weak point, but somehow she was uninformed about those kinds of niceties.

"But well… obviously it's a lineup to torment the three of us, isn't it? We're all warrant officers on our side, but on their side, two out of three are a captain and a first lieutenant on active duty. They didn't think to make it a fair show?"

Ikta smiled wryly with a defeated face. Matthew couldn't understand how he was so casual.

"I'm saying, this isn't the time to smile! What the hell are we gonna do about this!? Those two still a have grudge from before! At this rate, we're gonna be beat up in the mock battle with the practice as an excuse!"

Matthew's words pierced Torway in the chest, and he, feeling responsible, bit his lip and hung his head.

"I-I'm sorry, because of me… Ahh!?"

Without anyone saying anything, Ikta's flick to the forehead hit his brow. In addition, he snorted and spoke.

"Hey you're pretty conceited, Ikemen. Whichever way you think of it, I'm the main target for revenge, and the other two are bonus, right? To be perfectly honest, Matthew just got dragged in."

"I agree. As the one who interrupted the fight, I might also be responsible for how things

turned out. Well, there's no use talking about it now… Whatever the case, don't worry, Matthew."

"But how can you be so calm at a time like this?! If you have any sympathy, find a countermeasure!"

Yatori made a slightly puzzled face at Matthew's agonizing scream and folded her arms.

"I really do want to, but… in the name of the Igsem Family, this person can't make any discretions when it comes to military practice. Sorry about you guys, but I'll be fighting to my full abilities. Though, of course if unreasonable violence occurs in my presence I'll put a stop to it."

"We can trust Yatori to be steadfast in her position, can't we? Well, but I guess it's fine this way too. For you, it's also a personal showdown with your long awaited rival[9]. It's best to ignore other distractions. …By the way, Matthew, Haro's platoon isn't participating in practice?"

"The Medics Division is also headed on-site, unaffiliated with any camp, but they're to provide aid indiscriminately to injured persons from training. No, but Ikta, why the hell are you so relaxed?! Forget other people- now's when we should worry about ourselves, right?"

"Come on, calm down, Matthew. Our bullying seniors are a little annoying, but this is our first practice. Anything could happen, and whatever happens happens. If we die, we'll cross that boundary together, okay?"

Making such claims without any kind of support, Ikta suddenly rose from his seat. Bewildered, Torway called out to his retreating figure as he was leaving the lounge.

"Ik-kun, where…?"

"Just turning a crisis into an opportunity. The war of attrition- it's about time we put that to an end."

Ikta seemed to leave after leaving those words behind him, but suddenly his face casually poked back through the door and spoke.

"Also, don't call me Ik-kun."

On the way back from violent close-quarters combat training. Sergeant Major Suuya Mittokalif, taking a breath after quenching her thirst at a water fountain, was suddenly irritated to her core by a familiar voice echoing from the background.

"Ah- There you are, Suuya. I wonder if you have time right now. Can we talk a bit?"

"…"

"Suuya? Hey~ Suuya, can you hear me? Suuya Suuya Suuya!"

"I can hear you so please stop calling me so many times! Besides, why're you calling me by my first name and not my family name!?"

"I call girls over-familiarly by their first names even it's our first time meeting. It's a fundamental skill for hunters, you know. Depending on the situation, though."

“Such ridiculous things with a serious face…. Then, please at least call me with my rank.”

“I don’t wanna. Suuya has such a nice ring to it, adding Sergeant Major would just ruin it.”

Ikta spoke seriously. Her fatigue outweighing her irritation with their back and forth until now, Warrant Officer Suuya, not having a choice, decided to hear her scene partner out a little.

“…What do you want, Warrant Officer Solork? It’s no use meddling in commanding the next training, though.”

“No~ that’s actually it though, Suuya, it’s not good if I just keep leaving it to you, see? Maybe it’s about time you let me do it?”

“No, it perfectly fine. I don’t need you to do anything.”

“Ahh, you’re so cold~ Is that because I got along well with Amishiya?”

Suuya’s eyes glared at her scene partner filled with murderous intent. Without even the slightest hesitation, in the same manner as everyday small talk, Ikta desecrated her holy ground.

“…I, told you, didn’t I? Not to say my mother’s name again.”

“You did. But I have no memory of responding with a ‘yes, I understand’. But anyway, answer my question. -Is your not wanting to let me lead the platoon because I had a relationship with your mother?”

Suuya was at a loss for a reply. It was obvious that that was the case, but Ikta also knew that she couldn’t say so. Since acknowledging that would be acknowledging that she was disturbing military order with personal interests.

“…You’re…wrong. You’re wrong. That is not the reason.”

“Oh? Then why?”

“That, well…Warrant Officer Solork, your stamina is below standard, and you’re weak in both close-quarters combat and marksmanship, and I can’t see you as the type who’s fit to command on-site personally.”

“Hmm… Is that the number one reason?”

“That’s right. I’ll do that sort of thing, so please just relax until my rank becomes higher. The Annals of Military History or the Analysis of Military Tactics- if classroom lectures are your strong point, then isn’t it better if you focus on that area?”

Suuya established a reason after some difficulty. She’s not the verbally fluent type, is she?- Ikta saw through it immediately. Is that truly the reason? In addition to that, he also saw that she had a complex toward academics.

It was a rather underhanded method, but with a scene partner like this, it was incredibly easy to lead the conversation.

“…I’m going to change the topic just a bit. Suuya, you know that there’s practice in five days?”

“Huh? Ah, yes, I saw the announcement this morning. It seemed like marching training and a mock battle…”

“Right, about that mock battle, see. Are you confident you can win it?”

Without giving her a chance to think, Ikta added to his question. Suuya, taking her time, was hard-pressed for an answer.

“…That… of course, I’ll give it my best, but…”

“You’ll win if you give it your best?”

“…No. I hate to say it, but I think it’ll be difficult. There is too big of a difference in the strength between our camps. Captain Sarihasrag and First Lieutenant Sushura are officers on active duty, and there’s the rumor that Warrant Officer Yatorishino has the top grades this term…. It’s great that Warrant Officer Torway is in our camp, but there’s no saying that the last one, Warrant Officer Matthew, is outstandingly excelle…”

“I see. So it’s impossible for your leadership to reverse the disadvantage.”

After forcing the conversation to a pause by rephrasing in a way that refused objection, Ikta waited for the right time and made his move.

“Well then~ If we win the mock battle under my command, I wonder if that means I’m a better commander than you are?

“—Huh? Th-that’s…”

“That’s what it means, right? Since I’ll be doing something that you can’t. At the very least, you’ll have to revise your evaluation that I’m not ‘fit to command on-site personally’.”

Suuya panicked. Finally, after coming this far, she realized that she had been led by the nose. She wanted to get angry, but since she took part in the conversation, she couldn’t backtrack.

“…If, you win the mock battle, and, Warrant Officer Solork, if you had a big part in the victory…”

“You’ll allow me to command the platoon?”

“…That’s fine. …But- But! Warrant Officer, if you lose!?”

For Suuya, who strong point wasn’t eloquence, this was the best comeback she could muster. While finding her earnestness charming, Ikta brought the words his companion was hoping he’d say to his mouth.

“In that case, it’s exactly as you said- I shall then rethink my future and devote myself to the desk job I’m more suited for. From then on, I won’t say another word about your continued use of the platoon. …Is this fine?”

Ikta confirmed, and Suuya nodded clearly. When he saw that his companion wagered her pride and went along with his idea, the youth smiled, satisfied for the time being,

“Certainly we’ve made a deal. Now then, from today until the end of the practice, I shall take charge of the Third Training Platoon of the Illumination Division. As you’d expect, I

need a few days at least to warm up- no complaints, right?”

“…Understood. As you wish.”

“Let the soldiers hear it from you to follow my orders. They should accept it if you tell them our terms from earlier. If that doesn’t get through to them, then of course the deal is off. I’m looking forward to it.”

Firmly pushing his demands, Ikta finally took his leave of Suuya’s presence. —The stage was set- it was still too early to make that declaration. That expression is reserved for those who actually have confidence in their victory.

Translator’s Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ written as:弩弓 (crossbow) read as:ボウガン (bow gun)
2. Jump up↑ written as:オチ (flaw/punch line)
3. Jump up↑ written as: 黒石板 (black stone tablet); read as: ノート (notebook)
4. Jump up↑ idiom:借りてきた猫のように – like a borrowed cat, referring to how cats are timid in a new environment, such as when they are “borrowed” and taken somewhere else
5. Jump up↑ written as:サリハ大尉(Captain Sariha); read as: あのひと (that person)
6. Jump up↑ Ikta and Yatori are playing as a tag team, and the “touch” a few lines earlier was Ikta tagging Yatori in
7. Jump up↑ idiom:言わぬが花　(Not saying is a flower)
8. Jump up↑ written as: 娘さん(her daughter); read as: スーヤ(Suuya)
9. Jump up↑ written as: トルウェイ (Torway); read as: ライバル(rival)

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 1 - Chapter 4

Ikta Solork’s Science of Laziness

The first day of the practice, in which the seven platoons consisting of over 270 soldiers would participate, began amidst gales of wind and torrential rain.

“What is this? It sucks. It ruins the idea of ‘a fun picnic with everyone’, doesn’t it?”

Even though not complaining was an important principle for commanders, Ikta made these idle complaints just before their departure. Even Sergeant Major Suuya, who’d promised to be wholly cooperative just this once, was about to instinctively object to it.

“I guess it’s fine- if you think about it, this is better than if it were hot. –Other platoons, are you ready yet?”

Matthew and Torway, commanding their respective platoons, and Haro as well, responded from the back. In the conclusion of these four’s prior conversation, the role of supreme commander would be entrusted to Ikta, who was at the vanguard. Since the soldiers thought no doubt that Torway was their only option, they were incredibly dissatisfied on the inside.

“Then, we’re departing. We’re going…hey, all four platoons, it’s a downpour!”

With that lazy signal, their march began. Countless military boots trampled on the muddy ground, and the soldiers burdened with heavy knapsacks endlessly traversed the plains. With things like rations, first aid kits, sleeping bags, and arms for the mock battle, each person’s baggage attained a gross weight of 30~40 kilograms, and the weight of each and every step they made wasn’t even worth comparing to when they were empty handed.

“Our destination is 30 kilometers to the southwest. Assuming we stop and set up camp once, can we estimate our arrival to be around the afternoon of the next day?”

Suuya meant to make a completely ordinary confirmation, but Ikta tilted his head with a puzzled look.

“? No, we’ll be setting up camp on-site by the time the sun sets. Plus, I want to use tomorrow morning for a rehearsal.”

Troubled for a while at his words, Suuya then huffed a magnificent sigh. –It’s no use. This man doesn’t understand the slightest thing about what a ‘march’ is.

“…Umm, you see, Warrant Officer. I don’t know where the idea that it’s okay to smile is coming from, but first things first. 30 kilometers until our destination is simply the absolute distance, you know. Of course, the path isn’t stretched in a straight line. Therefore, the distance we’re walking in actuality is much longer. Do you understand that?”

“Um, yea.”

“Don’t just say, ’um, yea’. Next, the second thing- it’s very difficult to walk in unfamiliar territory with just a map. First, as strangers to the land, we’re going to get lost, and it’s not rare for the map itself to have errors. We’re going to take more and more time as we

correct them.”

“Well, yea.”

“No, we don’t need a ’well, yea’. Finally the third thing, in this bad weather, the march is going to be slower whether we like it or not. ‘Let’s establish a time of arrival taking into account these all these factors’, is what I was trying to say before!”

“I was also considering those things when I made my estimate though…Umm, for the time being, could I have you not yell so much? I just think that if the soldiers will get worried if they hear us arguing so soon after we departed.”

A sound argument came from him despite the fact that he seemed to be losing their quarrel, and Suuya faltered. Ikta, not saying any more in particular, began talking with the light spirit Kusu in his hip pouch possibly as a diversion from the long journey.

“Kusu, shall we play shiritori?[1] Nitpicker~” “Ruins” “Stubborn daughter~” “Reef” “ Fixated on the past~” “Tape” “Ethically narrow-minded~” “Disc” “Could even call her my step-daughter” “Reflex” “X? [2] …Umm- Nope, I can’t think of anything. Ahaha, it’s my loss because of my theme restriction~”

Ikta laughed and stroked Kusu’s head. Firmly repressing her desire to retort with “What theme?!”, Suuya already resolved to not make a single suggestion. –This type of person, he’ll just get what’s coming to him.

However, unrelated to Suuya’s spiteful hopes, there was something strange going on with her superior officer from the start.

When several hours passed since they departed, all the units had deviated slightly off-course, and had entered a small road under Ikta’s command. They were on an old mountain path with barely any signs human traffic, and it was possible for them to return back to the correct path if they shifted to the side of the road, but, of course, that was still a detour.

Thinking he showed his incompetence, Suuya had been gloating on the inside until now. However, Ikta’s next command flippantly exceeded her expectations and common sense.

“Cease marching. –So, listen well, okay? Those in front of me, without breaking file, open your knapsacks while standing. Torway, Matthew, Haro, do just as we planned!”

The soldiers complied with the orders even while tilting their heads in confusion. When everyone’s knapsacks were open excluding the last column, Ikta gave the next command without a moment’s delay.

“Well then, take out whatever I say and leave it at your feet. First, one canister of paint fluid for the mock battle, six pegs for securing the tents, then—“

The things they pulled from their knapsacks continued piling up at their feet. At this point in time, Suuya was in disbelief.

“You took out everything I said, right? Good, with that, using the tent lining which you took out last, roll up the rest of the items. Also, last file, about face! Those people directly in front of them, as soon as you finish with the work you’re doing now, also do the same

thing with the bags of the person in back of you.”

As the result of his commands being free of any pointless rambling, all of the work was finished before three minutes passed. Confirming that, Ikta lightly nodded his head and turned on his heel. And gave orders while facing forward.

“All troops, shift five steps to the left. –Good, resume marching.”

“Wai- Warrant Officer…!?”

While leaving behind one portion of their materials, the four platoons resumed marching. Suuya at her superior officer in a crazed rush.

“What are you thinking just randomly discarding our things?! This is clearly a violation of military command!”

“Discarding is disgraceful- this is depositing, you see. As per our plan of action, we’re taking only necessary materials along the course of our trip. We’ll retrieve it properly on the way back.”

“I can’t sit quiet with that kind of reasoning! Are you planning to speed up the march by lightening their load!? Let’s just say that works, what are you going to do if the things you discard end up being necessary?!”

“I said, not discarding but depositing…. Anyway, I actually chose things that we won’t become necessary in the future. We can use paint fluid diluted with water. For the tent, just the outer layer is enough for keeping out wind and rain. We’re also fine with just the minimum number of pegs necessary for securing them.”

While impatiently wiping a raindrop from his face, Ikta lowered his voice and continued.

“…Essentially, with the details of the practice, being overburdened with our full equipment isn’t a good thing. There’s no need for us to be pointless exhausted as a result of materials we won’t even use. You think so too, right?”

“But the leaders decided the contents of our equipment, so—“

“Yes, we’re depositing them, aren’t we? Even if we were discarding them, the management of materials falls under the on-site commander’s jurisdiction, you know. Besides, at any rate, the responsibility for this order is mine alone. I’m the one who’ll be scolded by the higher-ups and making explanations. You don’t need to worry.”

Ending the conversation one-sidedly, Ikta yawned as he continued walking. Suuya, once again prevented from making an objection, suppressed her frustration and follow after him.

About when an additional three hours passed, in the middle of a road caught between cliffs on both sides, Ikta suddenly stopped in his tracks. Ikta anxiously looked around, but the others couldn’t quite understand what he was bothered about.

“…Is something wrong? Did you lose confidence in the way we’re going?”

Next to him, Suuya asked sarcastically. But, not answering her, Ikta muttered to himself after surveying the surrounding terrain until he was satisfied.

“—This road is no good.”

“Huh?”

“Shall we go back? Alright, all troops change course!”

Suuya couldn’t hide her confusion at her superior officer, who was starting to turn back on the road they came without the slightest regret. Even if he noticed that they were going the wrong way, even if that were the case, then it’d be normal to pull out a map to confirm their route.

However, before even five minutes had passed after he started to turn back, Suuya grasped the youth’s intention. Unexpectedly, an underground tremor came rumbling toward them. When the surprised soldiers looked behind them, they found before their eyes the sight of the road, just ahead of where they’d been walking until a short time ago, buried by an enormous amount of rock and sand.

“Wha-“

Suuya shivered with the other soldiers. –If they had continued as before, they probably would have been caught in it!

“Alright alright, don’t stop your feet.”

Ikta clapped his hands and pushed the backs of the soldiers who stopped walking out of surprise. Hearing that, each of the platoons panicked and resumed marching, but Suuya couldn’t comprehend the youth’s composure at all.

“…Did you know?”

“Hm?”

“Don’t play dumb. I mean, that a landslide would happen there.”

When Suuya keenly questioned him, Ikta smiled vaguely and tilted his head.

“Well, I’m not a fortune teller. I can’t gauge the timing of when it’ll happen, but I somehow get the feeling that it’s dangerous around here. You didn’t notice the condition of the cliff before?”

“The cliff…? What do you mean?”

“First, there were newly revealed rock beds in here and there. It’s proof that the earth has started to wear down from the rain. Next, there were several trees angled downward growing from the cliff wall. Usually, on however steep a slope they grow on, trees grow heading upwards, you see, so that signified that the rock bed itself was loose.”

Suuya widened her eyes. Despite seeing the same scene, she had completely failed to notice those signs.

“Based on that, the circumstances were sufficient to be on lookout for a landslide. Therefore, we be prudent and turn back. –Does this answer your question?”

It was all Suuya could do to quietly nod at Ikta’s words. It was just common sense at work- at any rate, there was no doubt that he would show his incompetence. She couldn’t go on without saying that to herself.

“Ahh, we finally arrived. Alright, everyone, we’re taking role. When that ends, we’re setting up tents and taking a meal!”

The soldiers were starting to bustle around with a sense of liberation at being able to end their march, but Suuya alone was in a daze.

If one looked through the tree branches at western sky, the clouds covering it were still brightly dyed with the orange of the sun.

The rain, after passing a moment’s peak, turned into a small drizzle, and the leaves of the various trees provided shade for them even now as they entered their wooded destination.

“…To think, we really arrived before the sun set…”

“I told you, didn’t I? I made my estimate having properly accounted for everything.”

Ikta spoke while wringing his sopping wet overcoat. Suuya glared at him with a dissatisfied expression.

“…Have you come here before?”

“Nope, it’s my first time.”

“That’s a lie. I mean, Warrant Officer, you didn’t pull out the map even once on the way. That, and you didn’t even use an actual surveying instrument. Under those conditions, it’s impossible to travel the shortest distance unless you remembered by experience.”

Suuya insisted, following her own common sense. Ikta cracked his shoulders, which were stiff from the weight of his bag.

“I don’t know whether that was the shortest distance, but I paid attention to eliminating waste. Taking out the map in the middle of that rain would be a serious hassle, so confirming the path with it would be a two-fold loss. Those points being, the map in my head wouldn’t get wet, and there’s no work involved in taking it out.”

“Are you saying that you came with the whole thing memorized? …Even if that’s true, there are discrepancies here and there between the map and the actual terrain. At those times, if you don’t have experience, you can’t correctly make the judgment to correct the route.”

“Oh, I have experience. I was taught from my teacher from when I was younger. Since, fieldwork is the foundation of science.”

Science- having never heard such a word, Suuya tilted her head. While giving that girl a sidelong glance, Ikta, wiping the moisture off his skin with a towel, raised his voice slightly and called the leaders of each of the troops.

“Matthew, Torway, Haro- first, thanks for your hard work. There’s no one missing from your troops?”

“Everyone’s where they should be. We arrived before it got dark, and not a single person got lost on the way.”

The other two seconded Matthew’s response. Ikta nodded with satisfaction.

“Everything is according to plan so far. But, the real test has yet to come. –Listen well, Matthew, Torway. Since they are coming by a different route, the arrival of Yatori’s group will take place after noon tomorrow, even if they are early. The time until then is the biggest advantage that has been given to us. Let’s make the most of it.”

“U-umm- I…”

“You’re fine, Haro. You sleep early with your subordinates. Since your Medics troops are in neutral standing, starting tomorrow, you’ll be moving around separate from my command. –Ah, if sleeping by yourself is lonely, then come to my tent?”

“N-no, I’d like to protect my virtue, so I’ll decline…”

“I understand. By the way, I’ll be lonely sleeping by myself, so can I go to your tent in the middle of the night?”

“Ikta… when Yatori’s not here, you really let loose, don’t you?”

Matthew took on a defeated face, and next to him, Torway unintentionally smiled. After making two~three additional confirmations, the warrant officers separated.

“Sergeant Major Suuya. You can do this once you’ve finished eating, but would you pick five~six energetic people from among the light spirit holders in our platoon?

Suuya, who had been watching their activities absentmindedly, came to her senses when she was addressed by Ikta in conversation.

“Ah- yes, I understand…. Are you going on a preliminary inspection at night?”

“Well, I did say that we’re going to make the most of it. We’re just going to take a look at the river in the south. Because tomorrow, we’re planning to set up camp on the beach opposite and wait for the enemy.”

Ikta spoke about the matter innocently, but Suuya frowned and asked a question in response.

“The beach opposite the river in the south…? J-just wait a minute, Warrant Officer. That’s not the place where we’re confronting our opponent’s army. Didn’t you see on the bulletin board that it was designated as the open area in the north?”

“I saw it, but it was just written as ‘suitable for merging forces’, you know. It was never said that we had to fight there. Upon interpretation, we should be allowed to take up camp anywhere in these Southern Urt Woodlands.”

“Yes, but by custom, that…”

“If it were a real battle, we wouldn’t be doing things based on custom, you know. Since we have the freedom of choice, we might as well pick a battleground that will work to our advantage, no? -Well then, I’ll leave the selection of soldiers to you.”

Ikta left without any time to stop him. …Suuya herself still didn’t realize that she was getting drawn into his pace more with each passing moment.

After dinner, traveling together with seven soldiers including Suuya, Ikta went to see the condition of the Kuriri River which flowed through an area about one kilometer south of the campground. This place was roughly the southern tip of the Urt Woodlands which had

been designated as the location of the practice.

“Oh, the flow is wider than I thought. I didn’t think that it was much more than a small river, but the rain has proved fortunate, hasn’t it?”

“Huhh…”

Even the other soldiers including Suuya understood some of Ikta’s intention as he walked around muttering. The battle lineup with a river cutting through the space between them and the enemy army was suited for a defensive battle. That in itself might be the right choice. However…

“The water volume is increased, but even still, they could wade across this river if they submerge themselves to the bottom of one’s chest. …Checking with the map, there is a sandbar by which they could cross even more easily upstream.”

“The river’s width is one so that it’s possible they might think to attack by crossing the river, isn’t it? The flow isn’t that strong either, and it seems like by tomorrow, it will become even slower where the rain is weak.”

While illuminating it using Kusu’s Lantern, Ikta cautiously submerged himself in the river and confirmed the depth of the entire river. Its flow being no exception to that of other slow rivers, the water of the Kuriri River was quite muddy. Even considering that it was natural owing to it being nighttime now, it seemed that it would be difficult to see through the middle of the water even in broad daylight.

“Hmm, I’ve got a general idea of the middle of the river. What’s left is the surrounding terrain, but…”

Ikta, having risen from the water, this time entered the trees around the river and began glancing around the area.

“As expected, the majority of the vegetation is different from the tropics of the Eastern Province. …Hmm? This…”

He suddenly illuminated the tree which caught his eye from top to bottom with Kusu’s High Beam. It was a tall tree with a total height of about 20 meters, but other than that, it didn’t have any special characteristics. Behind him, his subordinates quickly shifted their interest elsewhere.

“..It’s an Isu tree. Wow, so they grow around here, too!”

However, the same tree before Ikta’s eyes was also visible to the others. Letting his joy show in his voice, he lightly hit the trunk with his fist, then directed the High Beam around it as if he were looking for something.

“Alright, they’re growing en masse in this area…. Ah, how lucky.”

“Umm, Warrant Officer… What could it be that you are so overjoyed about?”

“I’ve decided on a definite battle strategy. Ahh, thank goodness- with this, it seems like I can sleep well tonight.”

Ikta headed back, almost skipping as if to say, “Well then, let’s sleep, shall we?” Turning to his flustered subordinates, he spoke in a bright voice.

“Everyone, we’re sleeping early today. Early tomorrow morning, we’re starting our carpenting work.”

Taking a different route than Ikta’s group but headed for the same location, Sariha, Sushura, and Yatori’s three platoons, just past noon on the day following Ikta’s arrival, finally reached the Southern Urt Woodlands.

“Now then, set up camp. No need to be nervous, seeing as our opponents couldn’t have arrived yet anyway.”

Captain Sariha, stationing his soldiers across the open area in the north, couldn’t have thought even in his dreams that his opponents arrived earlier than himself. And he had proper justification. When he did the same practice as a warrant officer when he was younger, he had the experience of using both routes.

“This route is a little longer, but the path is simple and one won’t get lost. In comparison, that route might be shorter, but one has to overcome complicated forks and terrain. Hehehe, if it’s his first time, he’s getting lost…it’s complicated enough that people get lost during the journey and have to double back. You think he’ll arrive here in one piece?”

Accompanied by the silent Sushuraf, Sariha was filled with self-satisfaction. It seemed as if the words pride and carelessness existed to describe his current state.

Of course the person himself didn’t realize it, but it was a different story for outsiders with an objective perspective.

“Captain Sarihasrag. Would it be alright if I sent scouts from my platoon?”

Yatori, who had quickly finished stationing her soldiers, requested that permission from the head commander. Interrupted just as he entered a good mood, looked at her with irritation.

“…Scout? What’re ya sayin’, we don’t need anything like that. They shouldn’t have arrived yet, and both armies are supposed to confront each other here anyway, aren’t they?”

“On the bulletin board, it said that it was ‘suitable for merging forces’. In my case, I wouldn’t interpret that to be a designation of our place of confrontation.”

“…That was what was there, but for a first practice, he wouldn’t be that attentive to detail, right? He would be so exhausted by the time he gets here that he’d probably have no energy left for the mock-“

“Even so, we aren’t being cautious.”

“…I understand. Do what you want.”

Becoming annoyed, Sariha gave his permission not with firm support but to drive her away. The fiery haired girl, saluting then leaving her superior’s presence, returned to her own troops and briskly gave a command.

“Scouting Unit, listen up. First, head straight down south. Look for signs of the enemy

while returning north from there.”

At the command of their esteemed platoon leader, her subordinates nodded obediently. Platoon Ikta couldn’t even hold a candle to her troops when it came to their high morale.

“By my guess, our opponents’ forces have already made their arrival. Judging from Ikta’s… their supreme commander’s character, he probably wouldn’t want clash head-on, and if he avoids the open area in the north when setting up camp… then he’ll likely be here.”

Yatori’s fingertip pointed to a point on the map, the Kuriri River of the Southern Urt Woodlands. The three of her subordinates who understood her intentions saluted with vigor and promptly started sprinting south.

“Those were precise orders, Yatori. Is reading Solork’s thoughts a specialty of yours?”

Unexpectedly addressed from the background, Yatori saluted as she turned around. Protected in her vicinity by over 20 brawny bodyguards, it was the girl of the Imperial Family, Her Highness, Chamille.

“I am much obliged, Your Highness. …However, truly it must be impossible to completely read Ikta’s thoughts.”

“Even for you, who has known him for such a long time?”

“’’Even for me… Because it is I’’…no, likely it is both. He definitely thinks while reading how his opponent will predict his thoughts. If you interact him with the intention of keeping secrets, then you will find yourself in dire circumstances.”

He’s a troublesome man- the princess smiled bitterly. Yatori also smiled lightly, and suddenly changed the topic.

“By the way, thank you for today. You especially came to observe our practice.”

“Only to keep watch so that Captain Sarihasrag and Lieutenant Sushura don’t use the mock battle as an excuse to perpetrate violence. You are my Knights. As I had been protected, I will protect you.”

“I am greatly obliged to your kindness. …But, once the fighting begins, however slight the chance, again please remove yourself so you aren’t involved. Be cautious of stray arrows, and always stay behind them.”

Yatori spoke while motioning to the bodyguards with her eyes. Recruited from the soldiers who were permanently stationed at the center base, they were superior soldiers excellent in both physical appearance and physique. Each of them was equipped with an air shooter and light armor; they were fit to be called an iron fortress.

“I understand. For them to fulfill their role, I must also not carelessly expose myself, correct?”

“Then I shall also keep in mind my role of trusting that you’ll not carelessly expose yourself.”

Exchanging a friendly banter, the two of them, lord and retainer, unintentionally smiled. …However, the footsteps of the scouts who were dispatched earlier returning back at full

speed destroyed the peaceful atmosphere.

When he heard the report that the enemy troops had already deployed their camp on the opposite side of the Kuriri River, Captain Sarihasrag was dumbfounded for a few seconds, and finally returned to himself after having his shoulder whacked by his younger brother, Lieutenant Sushura.

“A-all troops proceed south! Return to column formation and head to the Kuriri River!”

They also had the option of waiting as they were in the open area, but if they didn’t confront their army and thus reached a stalemate, Sariha would lose face as the commander who was scared by his trainee opponents. Since he was higher in both social class and rank, he had no choice but to defeat Ikta no matter where he was waiting.

“N-no big deal. Once the soldiers return to their columns, they won’t be scared as they head from the open area to the river. They think that the start of the fighting will come after they confront the other army. For this at least, there is no room for a weird, far-fetched interpretation— right, Sushura!?”

The voice that sought reassurance from his younger brother was shrill and nervous. As she heard this from a removed location, Yatori felt exasperated. –The mock battle hasn’t so much as started yet- wasn’t it a bit too early for their pretense to start coming off?

As he listened to Sushuraf’s sounds of agreement Sariha slowly regained his composure. When he faced the enemy troops on the other side of the Kuriri River, he had somehow recovered a dignified expression.

“Did they really set up camp on the other side of the river…? And their troops have completely finished deploying- shit, how did they move this fast?”

Sariha bit his thumbnail with frustration. In front of his eyes, the enemy troops had already raised their battle flag. If they answered this with their own flag, then that moment would mark the start of the fight.

“Argh, they raised their flag first! That alone is enough of a disgrace- we’re also deploying immediately!”

The soldiers, pressured by their commander, panicked and rearranged from a column formation to a formation meant for battle. When that finished, Sariha immediately made them raise their battle flag. One couldn’t blame Yatori for having a headache.

“I supposed there’s no helping that he is flustered by this…. Though, he’s already fallen behind, so it’s better if he sets up camp at his leisure to make the enemy impatient. This is just what Ikta expected, you know.”

Keeping that opinion to a mutter in her mouth- though she knew her place far better than Ikta did- Yatori’s frustration grew stronger.

Utterly ignorant of his subordinate’s mental state, Sariha thought only of how to defeat the opponent in front of him.

“If our troops are equally matched than naturally, it’s the loss of the side which attacks first in a river defense encampment…. Soldiers who cross the river would be subject to a

volley of shots while in a defenseless state. Neither side wants to attack, so this becomes a standoff."

"Older brother, how about having the soldiers test the depth of the water first? The situation changes depending on the depth of the river."

"No, there's no need for that. I know this river well. Normally, one could cross with one's body submerged to the waist, but it's currently swollen with rain, so it'd be approximately just below the chest…"

Saying that, Sariha resentfully looked down on the muddy river surface. …The possibility that this river wouldn't function in a river defense encampment was denied by his own experiences. Therefore, things immediately became troublesome.

"…If I remember correctly, there is a sandbar upstream. We take our troops around and attack the enemy from behind, an offensive matching our timing with the main force… is what first comes to mind. But seeing as we've set up camp here, our opponents have probably also read this much…"

No matter which move he made, there was risk involved. That kind of mindset was one of unintentionally waiting for the opponent's move. Sariha didn't need a long time to enter that state, and the enemy on the opposite shore read that completely and mobilized their troops.

"…Older brother. One of the enemy units has broken off of formation and seems to be headed upstream."

"I can see that! Is that Ikta Solork's unit!? If that's his game, alright then…!"

With the long-awaited action of the enemy, Sariha leapt like a baited fish at the provocation.

"Warrant Officer Yatorishino! Lead your platoon to the river crossing site upstream, and ambush the enemy there!"

Thus ordered, Yatori avoided making an immediate reply, and hesitated slightly before returning her opinion.

"…I mean no disrespect, Captain. I think that it is dangerous to divide our forces here. If that is what we will do, wouldn't you rather avoid a confrontation at the river and return to the open area in the north?"

"…Dangerous? What greater danger is there than being completely surrounded by the enemy!?"

"Platoon Ikta is an Illumination Unit. There are few powerful air gunner soldiers in its composition, and its main armaments are the bow gun and the short spear. The effect of their dazing by means of a High Beam is also reduced by half in the afternoon. When they come by circling around upstream, we can counter before we are taken by their pincer attack. …What I'm concerned about now is, whether what they are wishing for might be our response to their invitation?"

Sariha laughed at Yatori's cautious theory.

"Hmph- Has the daughter of the Igsems lost her nerve? Take a good look, there's a river

dividing the space between us and the enemy. Even if we are charged with twice the amount of troops, it’s our victory just by ambushing their troops.”

“It seems that you have forgotten, but this river defense encampment is ‘’something that the enemy has prepared.’’ By no means is it your plan, Captain. No matter what the circumstances, isn’t thinking that it will be equally advantageous for us asking too much?”

“…! N-nonsense- don’t defy your superior’s orders! Go to intercept them immediately!”

When conversation was denied, Yatori naturally gave up on any further persuasion. She faced Sariha with a salute and accepted her order, then took her subordinates from her platoon and began the migration upstream.

“…That direction doesn’t count as either offense or defense. Our Captain, judging from his face it seems he’s already completely reached a point where he can’t think of anything but temporary solutions. —Ahh, good grief. From your perspective, he’s certainly an easy piece to push around, isn’t he, Ikta?”

-

Over 20 minutes after Platoon Yatori departed. Both armies continued to glare at each other across the river, but when for some reason the moment metallic sounds came ringing from upstream, Matthew was the first to change his expression.

“…That’s the sign. –All soldiers, prepare your arms.”

The soldiers simultaneously inserted a bullet into their air shooters. Of course since this was a mock battle, they were paint balls fired by increased air pressure. The same dye was applied to bow gun arrows, wooden bayonets, and short spears with their tips removed. People smeared with these colors were treated as “killed in action,” and couldn’t engage any further combat.

“Alright—are you listening? ‘’We’re coordinating with Platoon Ikta when we launch the attack.’’”

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Among them was Ikta Solork himself.

Matthew’s mouth named a platoon that shouldn’t have been in the area. Seeming to have been transmitted to the opposite shore as well, the deployed soldiers sharpened their vigilance. –And the next moment, that incident came crashing down on them like a surging wave.

First, having earlier pretended to head upstream but turning back midway, then concealing in the forest by the riverside until now, Platoon Ikta came running out with weapons in hand. Among them was Ikta Solork himself.

The moment their vanguard lined with their own, Matthew and Torway’s platoons also fiercely faced the river once more and began attacking. Sariha’s troops on the other shore wore dumbfounded expressions. Why you ask, ‘’that’s because Ikta and the others had crossed the Kuriri River, whose depth currently rose to just below one’s chest, at most soaked no higher than their knees!’’

“Wha…!? F-fire! Attaack!”

Sariha’s order, which resembled a shriek, echoed across, but at that point the majority was decided.

The defensive river encampment being advantageous for the side meeting the enemy is due to the fact that it can attack while the soldiers coming from the center of deep water are defenseless and exposed. However, with a water depth below the knees, that effect is weak. Because Platoon Ikta, which was led into the forest, was furthermore added to the attack, of course a difference in war potential in the three platoons vs. two platoons battle also arose.

In part due to the surprise of receiving an impossible attack, Captain Sariha’s units couldn’t muster a proper retaliation. The soldiers in the front row fired paint balls and paint arrows, forming a “line of battle,” and, receiving an attack made with bayonets and short spears one after the other, they were completely driven into a corner from the stalemate.

“R-retreat! Fire while retreating!”

They were destroyed by the volume of fire once they were struck directly- that being said, even as they turned around and retreated, they were annihilated by their continued pursuit. Sariha was at wit’s end when he gave the command, but it could also serve well as humor.

“Wha… watch it, you’re in my way! If you’re ‘killed in action’ then move already!”

“Y-yes, but still…”

In the front line, which was a jumble of enemies and allies, the living and the dead jostled one another. If people were really killed in action, then one would just need to step over the dead bodies, but in this case they were only dead according to the rules. In part due to their inexperience with mock battles, they ended up as obstacles by standing upright in that area.

“N-now- shoot while the enemy is stopping!”

Taking advantage of the fact that the bullets were paint balls, Sariha, not caring whether they struck his allies, had the soldiers stage a comeback and fire their air shooters. It was a dreadfully shameful sight, but the short time they gained from it became what allowed them to survive. Even so—

“Oh, come on- I knew it would turn out like this! Platoon, attack! Please protect your fellow troops as they’re retreating!”

Slipping through the spaces between the gradually retreating soldiers, the members of Platoon Yatori, which had run into a predicament, returned fire on the enemy. Having previously anticipated a free-for-all fight, Yatori armed her soldiers’ bow guns with insertion-style short spears from the beginning. With the enemy in front of their eyes and noses, long things were stronger than both air shooters and bow guns.

“So you did come, Yatori. –Alright, everyone take it easy and rotate! End of swordplay!”

If not for her interference, their rout would’ve been the perfect chance, but Ikta wasn’t mistaken in the least in the moment he chose to pull back. Calmly distancing themselves

from the short spear-wielding soldiers of Platoon Yatori, they targeted and completely surrounded their opponents, who had carelessly rushed out. Seeing this, Yatori, also sensed a favorable opportunity.

“Platoon, change course! We can’t go straight back- please escape to the forest while the enemy is still disorderly!”

Platoon Yatori’s movements were so precise and quick that one couldn’t believe that they’d only trained for one month, Just now it seemed that they had scattered and fled, but there was no doubt that they had established a meeting place.

“Ahh- we’re were shaken up more than I expected. Hey, Matthew, where are you~? Are you still alive~?”

Ikta called out in a trailing voice, and a short time later a large body appeared from the mass of people.

“I’m here… and I’m alive somehow. I tried to shoot Yatori earlier, but instead I was shut down, though…”

“Ahh well, that’s because our center was under attack. I don’t think that Yatori’s attack was directed towards foot soldiers. Well, I thought we did enough damage to their main forces. For the time being, shall we collect the survivors and reform our ranks?”

Nodding together, the two began to rebuild their own platoons. However, at that time, Sergeant Major Suuya, who survived without being “killed in action” came running, and exploded at Ikta as he was casually counting the number of soldiers.

“Warrant Officer, why didn’t we go in pursuit of them!? Warrant Officer Yatorishino’s platoon even withdrew- if we’re going to chase and beat the confused main forces of our enemy, then that was a perfect chance just now!”

“Huh? You guys are able to carry out a pursuit?”

Ikta asked back with a blank face. Losing her patience at this, Suuya unthinkingly started to raise her voice, but when she was on the verge of actually opening her mouth, she came to a sudden realization about what her superior was saying. When she calmly surveyed her surroundings, the situation was clear. The ranks of the soldiers, who were shaken in the fighting, were thrown in complete disarray, and voices calling for missing allies were echoing from here and there. In the center, there were injured persons in need of medical attention, and it would probably still take some time for each of the platoons to adequately regain order.

There was no way they could carry out an effective pursuit in these conditions. If they acted rashly, they would encounter return fire. Not getting drunk on his plan’s success, Ikta had calmly made this judgment. Even Suuya wasn’t unable to acknowledge its justification.

In the first place, the delay in recovering order was due not to Ikta’s poor commanding, but to the fundamentally low experience of the soldiers in responding to his commands. The one who hadn’t given Ikta the training necessary to raise that until the verge of the actual event, was none other than Suuya herself.

“…No, we can’t. …Please excuse me…”

Sensing that there was no room for a dissenting opinion, she lost her resolve midway and began to help with the work of sorting the survivors. While continuing that, Suuya quietly asked a question of the superior officer beside her.

“…Everything until now, Warrant Officer, was it all according to your predictions?”

“? What’s this all of a sudden? I told you everything beforehand, and you even helped with the bridge construction didn’t you?”

Ikta shrugged his shoulders. Awkwardly averting her eyes, Suuya flashed back to the events of the morning.

“…Make it, underwater? A bridge?”

When she first heard the idea, Suua had absolutely no idea what her scene partner was saying. Her superior officer, who had borrowed all of the soldiers under his command and started lumberjacking, casually explained to her while creating blisters on his hand with an axe he wasn’t accustomed to using.

“Well, not making- in this situation we’re just submerging them. The width of this river is roughly 25 meters, and the isu trees in this area are on average about 10-20 meters in total length. We’re submerging these on the river bed perpendicular to the river bed, you see. If we lay over five of them, we create a fine underwater path. For three platoons to use to attack, well, we’ll probably need to lay across 30 of them.”

“But, in essence this is a log, right? Don’t trees float in water…?”

“A tree is a tree, but this is an isu tree, meaning that it’s a hard tree. A tree’s hardness is inversely proportional to its water content by percentage, but in an isu tree that is extremely low. Essentially, that means that its interior is fully packed together.”

“Right…”

“Well simply speaking, this tree will sink in water. The flow of that river is rather gentle, so if we secure it a bit there’s no need to worry about it being washed away. Above all, thanks to the water being muddy, our submerged bridge will be invisible to the enemy. We, luring them here, are the only ones who know that this river can’t be used a in defensive river formation.

“That which destroys the conception of a bridge as something that we build above water, Anarai Khan‘s idea of a ‘submerged bridge.’ …However, since it doesn’t have much of a use aside from military applications, the one who thought of it wasn’t too proud, though.”

Ikta murmured nostalgically. His faraway eyes at that time left a deep impression on Suuya.

“…Let’s say, if the enemy comes probing the depth of the water, what do you plan on doing then?”

“I think the probability of that is low. The Kuriri River is also a practice ground for the defensive river encampment, and Captain Sarihasrag, hailing from the center base, knows

the depth of this river from direct experience. Once he sees that its been swollen with the rain, he'll have predicted it to be deep and won't suspect it to be shallow. He would need to realize that we have an 'underwater bridge' in order to suspect it, but do you think that short tempered mind of his is capable of that kind of flexibility?"

In the time it took for Suuya to find one flaw, Ikta prepared 10 times as many words. … Thinking that they were empty, rash remarks, anyone would be able to hold him in contempt. However, that that was not the case was proved in this recent battle. His words were words with power.

If one casually looked around, Suuya was definitely no longer the only one who couldn't ignore this young warrant officer. One offensive victory so easily caused people's evaluation of him to change completely.

"Well, if they come probing, we'll fire and drive them away. Since if they enter the river, they'll be in range of an air shooter. But, if anything Sadist Ikemen's incompetence is worse than I imagined. As a result, we took more damage than I would've liked. Even if they are paint balls, shooting at your allies- is that normal?"

His tone itself seemed to be joking, but Ikta was truly angry about that matter. Hearing that, Suuya was increasingly bewildered. The man in front of her whom she had come to respect now appeared about to cry.

"Mm, so the sorting of the survivors and those killed in action is done. –Haro, my angel! Please give medical treatment to the injured!"

"You noticed us!? …W-well since the fighting appears to be over, please excuse us…"

Haro's Medics Platoon, which had been hiding in a corner of the forest the whole time, came out when they were called by Ikta and circled around giving medical care to the injured persons born from the recent fighting. Deaths also occurred at times during mock battles, but fortunately this time, it seemed that they had gotten by with only large numbers of people with slight injuries such as bruises or sprains.

"That was a skillful play, Solork. Your opponents were flustered."

Her Highness, Chamille, protected by her body guards, showed her face from behind Platoon Haro. It appeared that the two of them had united together sometime as she was searching for a place from which she could watch over the progress of the battle without interfering with the fighting.

"Thanks. But we're in the middle of training, you know, if you not doing anything in particular, then please stay back, princess."

Saying that, Ikta shook his hand as if shooing her away. Her Highness, the Princess's lips bent in a "へ" shape and the members of bodyguards glared at the insolent youth with even darker murderous expressions, but the youth paid it no mind. The princess who ruined the cheery atmosphere returned with her bodyguards to Haro's side, in her place, Torway came running from upstream accompanied by two subordinates from the Medics.

"I'm back, Ik-kun, Maa-kun. Would this situation mean that things went well?"

"Ik-kun forbidden- but I suppose it's a nice result. Your report, please."

“Right, understood. As planned, I did climb trees together with my subordinates at the river crossing point upstream, but… who came up there were Yatori-san’s soldiers, though? Since only three of them went ahead, we know that they were scouts meant to confirm the presence of our forces.”

“I see. Did you bring them down?”

“We shot them all, and they’re ‘killed in action’. After that, we sounded their signal gong, but… about that, though, it’s the worst pattern among the several we hypothesized.”

“Ahh, Yatori has always operated to the upper limits of our hypotheses, hasn’t she? Without directing all of the soldiers in her platoon to the river crossing point upstream, she leaves her main force in the middle so they can support their allies at any time, and sent light-footed reconnaissance soldiers to confirm whether my platoon was actually coming.”

With that, if the enemy were there, they could counter attack, and if the enemy weren’t, they could be confident that it was a trap and return to the main force. It was a reliable and careful way of attacking very like her. Ikta thought to prevent the reconnaissance soldiers from sending the sound signal so he had sent skilled gunner soldiers, Torway included, upstream, but… at this rate, it seemed that there being no sign from her subordinates in itself confirmed the presence of a trap for Yatori.

“Well, it’s fine. In any case, we’ve shaved off a substantial part of the enemy’s battle forces. Even by just comparing the number of remaining enemies and the number of allies ‘killed in action,’ you can tell that the recent battle was a great victory for us.”

“It’d be easier if they’d just surrender, though…. In actuality, the enemy has suffered enough damage that it wouldn’t be so far-fetched, no?”

Matthew said that in a slightly tired condition, and Ikta stuck out his tongue and shook his head horizontally.

“If their supreme commander weren’t Sadist Ikemen, then we could hope for a surrender. With his nature, he is not unlikely to make his army fight until the last man so he himself isn’t ‘killed in action.’”

As he let Torway and Matthew return to their respective platoons, Ikta faced all of the soldiers and made a declaration.

“-Therefore, everyone, I’m sorry but I have another job for you. First, shall we head to the northern entrance of the Woodlands? We’ll take the detour route from the east, so all the survivors don’t be late and follow~”

He gave a command in a trailing voice that was unexpected for many of the soldiers. Sergeant Major Suuya, the head of the file that began marching despite the confusion, confirmed Ikta’s intentions.

“…Warrant Officer, are we going in pursuit? Are you confident that the escaped enemy is in the north? Even so, why the detour and not the direct route?”

“Ahaha, you’re so serious, Suuya~ Be more easygoing when you go about it.”

Not panicking, not hurrying, at a constant pace, Ikta began his explanation to a baffled Suuya.

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“Hahh, hahh, Shit…! It shouldn’t- it shouldn’t have turned out like this!”

Captain Sariha, who had lost the confrontation interposing the Kuriri River, bringing along his remaining subordinates, escaped to a place that he could feel was somewhat safe. But both the soldiers and he himself resembled a dog, completely exhausted with its tail between its legs.

“Older brother, will you drink, water?”

First Lieutenant Sushuraf was also beside him, ever silent and expressionless, was supporting his brother. Taking the canteen from his younger brother, Sariha drained the contents in one gulp, but in the process, water had entered his trachea and he choked.

“Coughcough! ….Damn, what the hell is this! Why were those guys able to come at us running on water!? The water depth over there should definitely be to just under one’s chest! Is Ikta Solork a fucking magician?!”

“Older brother, calm down. That was probably because they submerged something in the water. I daresay an object like a bridge.”

“Bridge- A bridge!? A bridge is something we lay over water, and those fucking Illumination Division carpenters would take days or weeks to build it! The earliest they could have arrived here was yesterday night!”

Sariha, unable to accept the unpleasant reality, began yelling, and a while after his arrival, Yatorishino Igsem came over to him. Her platoon had also sustained quite some damage, but there was strength in her soldiers’ eyes, and the remaining forces were gathering one after the other.

“I’m surprised. Does even a person such as you, Captain, know the concept of a universal escape route?”

The first thing out of Yatori’s mouth was sarcasm, but she was quite seriously surprised.

A “universal route” was a military term, and it said, “take any path you want but gather at this location.” In this situation, it implied a meeting place for when they had been defeated and scattered, but….

“Keh…! Why you, Yatorishino…!”

Sariha couldn’t retort with anything. Whether he had thought about losing before the fighting, or whether he couldn’t think that he was sure to win- whichever was true, this matter was already nothing more than an embarrassment for him.

“I-I’m not the only one at fault here! If you had come to support me earlier…!”

“Please excuse me for that. But if there is a unit that can move faster than mine, then show it to me.”

Yatori spoke coldheartedly. Yatori had confidence regarding her tactics for this battle. She had done the best she could under the conditions set by her incompetent superior officer-

if Ikta were here, he might be saying that right now.

In actuality, if not for her decision to leave the entirety of her platoon on friendly territory, Sariha's and Sushuraf's troops would probably have been destroyed in pursuit. Sariha was also aware of this, and he was miserable about it.

"By the way, what will you do? If we rebuild our troops and have another battle, you, the supreme commander, must give us directions. –And as you can see, my platoon is always ready to fight."

"…, y-you don't need to tell me that!"

Standing as if a flame were held to his behind, Sariha shouted at the weary survivors and had them reform their columns. After that, he fell deep in thought for 10 seconds, then brought to his mouth the first plan he could think of.

"We're ambushing them. We'll hide soldiers on both sides of the road stretching west of the open area in the north, and the moment they come by, we'll attack from the left and right. First we attack from the outside, then we charge at them. If we do that, then we should be able to compensate for our disadvantage in numbers."

That's not a bad plan, Yatori thought. Only if the enemy pursues us, though.

"For that purpose, it'll be necessary to have the light-footed soldiers go ahead and grasp the enemy's current location, though…"

"In that case mobilize your soldiers, Yatorishino! They're just bursting with energy, aren't they!?"

Firmly suppressing a sigh, Yatori shook her head vertically. –Bursting with energy, was it?

It was amazing how he could say that, she thought. …They abruptly turned back from halfway up the path upstream to save their allies, and even undertook rear guard combat to prevent the enemy's pursuit. There was no way that they were less exhausted than the group that only fled the scene.

While considering these things, before even 10 seconds passed after she received the command, Yatori chose three soldiers from her unit and deployed them as scouts. After seeing them leave, Sariha also immediately began his march.

"Let's have some fun, Ikta Solork. I'll give a good one to that smug face of yours…!"

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"-I'd say Sadist Ikemen is getting fired up about his revenge around now. On the contrary, we weren't pursuing them or anything in the first place~"

Saying that, Ikta tauntingly stuck his tongue out in the air. Suuya creased her eyebrows.

"I know that there is the risk of ambush during a pursuit, though…if we don't attack for fear of that, how are we supposed to win this fight?"

"You're pretty thickheaded, no, Suuya? But in that case, let me ask you something- if it were you, how would you deal with an enemy waiting to ambush somewhere along the route?"

“Well…normally, I would have the soldiers be completely on guard to their left, right, and rear. So that they will be able to respond immediately when they receive a surprise attack, …”

“That’s straightforward, but it a little unscientific. With your method, in contrast to the enemy which could come attacking us at any time, we have to continue being vigilant the entire time. Since the enemy can just gauge the timing to attack us after seeing our figures. We’d have a much harder time than they would. It’s not really worth it.”

“…Then, would it be better to split from the path ourselves and go looking for the enemy in the forest…?”

“That is even more unscientific. There is a high probability that we won’t find them if we search at random, and if we get lucky and do find them, then by that time our opponents will also have noticed our presence. If we walk and push through vegetation in large numbers, like it or not we’re going to make noise.”

“…So what are you saying that we do? I mean, nothing’s gonna happen if we don’t find the enemy-“

Interrupting her, Ikta thrust his index finger in front of Suuya’s eyes.

“Listen well, Suuya- first please abandon your preconceived notion that ‘we are pursuing the enemy.’ There’s no rule anywhere saying that we have to pursue and destroy an escaped enemy at all costs. If an unjustifiable pursuit will on the contrary welcome a disadvantage, then it’s better to just think of different plan, see?”

“…a different plan…?”

“Incidentally, this is what I was thinking. —If we’re the ones giving pursuit, then we’ll be exhausted- that being said, we are reluctant to be the ones pursued. But if we are making them pursue us, then that’s exciting. On that point, war and romance are completely the same.”

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Sariha was impatient. Already more than one hour had passed after he finished concealing soldiers on both sides of the road which he anticipated to be the surprise attack location. In spite of that, no matter how much time passes, the main enemy forces won’t come in pursuit.

“…What the hell is up with this- did those guys have no intention to fight in the first place? …Hey, Yatorishino!”

“Yes. What is it, Captain?”

“Are the scouts still not back yet!? Can’t they perform one reconnaissance job properly?!”

His hypocritical abuse going in one ear and out the other, Yatori explained uninterestedly.

“I directed the soldiers I sent as scouts to go, in order, south, then east, then north in search of the enemy. Therefore, if they are this late in returning here, that means that the enemy forces at the Kuriri River did not head directly north- in other words, that there is a high probability that they didn’t take a straightforward route in their pursuit.”

“What the hell? In other words my orders were wrong!?”

Yatori was fed up with this superior officer who became hysteric no matter what she said, but she suddenly heard a noise and turned around. The three soldiers she sent as scouts, were standing there out of breath.

“”We make our report, Warrant Officer Yatorishino. The three enemy platoons, seem to have taken a detour route east from the Kuriri River to go north. Currently, they have already deployed their main forces in a formation to block the northern entrance of the Southern Urt Woodlands.

Sariha, hearing that report from nearby, dropped his jaw in shock, not understanding what it meant.

“…They blocked, the northern entrance of the Woodlands? What for? What’s Ikta Solork planning?”

With a backward glance at her perplexed superior officer, Yatori , who had realized Ikta’s intentions, curved her lips.

“-They got us. Our escape route has been cut off, Captain.”

“Huh?”

“Have you forgotten where we came from to go to the Southern Urt Woodlands? It was the northern entrance. In addition, we will eventually have to pass through the northern entrance to return to the Center Base. That being said, if the return route is blocked when the mock battle ends, that would mean it was a lost battle because withdrawal was impossible.”

Sariha’s face instantly turned pale. He hadn’t considered that angle until just now.

“I-if you give it some time, then the mock battle will end, right? So what’s withdrawal being impossible or whatever-“

“Of course, they can’t actually prevent us from returning by passing through the northern entrance. However, this is a matter of interpretation, Captain. When we assume that this is a real battleground, you understand that there is no such official announcement of the ‘end of fighting’, correct? In that case, ’’what happens if the fighting continues on like this?’’ —I think that the victor of the mock battle should be decided on the basis of that realistic assumption-”

“…,, so if we can’t do anything with our escape route cut off, that equals their victory?”

“The justification of that verdict increases. Because in the current situation, we have already sustained greater damages.”

Sariha bit his nail and thought deeply. …In the first place, the first mock battle of the practice was usually a simple affair, with the first time the fighting started in the open area in the north also being the last, that ended in the destruction of one side. A judgment or a retreat- when he had been a warrant officer himself, it never turned into such a complicated matter.

“…So that guy, who dealt with this as a real battle, was better prepared than me, who took

part in this thinking it was a game[3]? Better than me, a captain on active duty? -Argh, don’t fuck with me!”

A frenzied Sariha, by forcefully kicking each of their backs, returned the soldiers hidden in the brushwood to the road. When they, including Sushuraf’s platoon which was encamped on the opposite side, reformed their files, he ordered a forward march in a furious voice.

“Head for the northern entrance! If that’s what they want, then we’ll go at them directly! We’re not letting this gap in numbers stop us- I command a battalion of 600 soldiers as a captain in actual war, got it!? If this is just a plain and simple matchup between numbers, then it’s obvious that we win when it comes to experience!”

Not lending an ear to Yatori’s voice asking him to calm down, Sariha started the march at full speed.

-

“Oh- We’re here, we’re here. Alright, all troops, ‘’look like you’re ready to shoot, okay’’?”

Ikta, who deployed the soldiers in a formation to block the way of the northern entrance, when he could see the enemy in his field of vision, made them take a position to intercept them. Bow gun and air shooter muzzles were lined up next to each other at equal intervals.

“However, ‘prepare yourself for a charge.’’ After the signal, which is the moment they reform their files into ranks, we will fight and pierce through it. And so, ready your arms.”

A confirmation followed. Giving detailed instructions to his subordinates, he himself had already joined the line of battle with a bow gun in hand.

“This isn’t something we need to rush. Don’t stick out, and consciously coordinate with your allies when you attack, alright? The best spearwork is the same as trash when compared to teamwork.”

The enemy halted at a distance that came barely within range of an air shooter, and they finally began changing their battle formation from the columns used for marching to the rows meant for attacking. With the instant of the deciding battle within sight, the soldiers swallowed.

“Hey, hurry up and change to your ranks! If I need to say it again I’ll kick you!”

On one hand, there was more or less a chance of victory for Sariha, who was making his allies, low in morale, take action through threats.

The enemy was deployed in a formation that blocked the northern entrance of the Southern Urt Woodlands. Conversely, no matter what happened, they couldn’t go back any further. He was able to see a way to win at this ‘cliff as per the rules.’

“’’Push them back…!’’ If they leave the designated battle area in the middle of the mock battle, that is a grand violation of orders. If even one of their soldiers passes the boundary line, they’ll be disqualified for breaking the rules!”

He didn’t consider it a disadvantageous match. Fortunately, the enemy forces were ready

to meet them. When that side stopped their feet, this side would charge with all their remaining strength, so they could probably cover the difference in numbers with force. The path was narrow, so the enemy couldn't escape to the sides.

"Listen up, even if you're 'killed in action,' don't just fall down. Pretend that you didn't notice you got shot and push the enemy as far in as you can."

With a sidelong glance at her superior officer who gave an order which was nothing if not a violation of the rules itself, Yatori secretly heaved a sigh. –She was tired of listening to this captain on active duty. Did he think he could command dead people on the battlefield?

With the soldiers' disappointment imperceptibly increasing, their columns were finally arranged in a charging formation. As if sending the order to attack from the rear side, Sariha inflated his chest completely with air, but-

"…ALRIGHT, ALL UNITS CHAR- ack!?"

His order was awkwardly cut off. If one looked, pink paint was splattered on the back of Captain Sariha's head. At the sudden, unpredicted turn of events, the soldiers next to him only widened their eyes and looked at their superior officer.

"…Huh…?"

The person himself, dumbfounded, put a hand to the back of his head. The moment he saw the sticky evidence that he had been "killed in action," he slowly began to comprehend the situation. –He had been shot. From where? Diagonally from the back. Then, by whom?

When his questions reached that point, the answer was derived almost intuitively. Sariha turned his body around and glared with a furious expression into the forest next to the road, and shrieked at the culprit hidden inside.

"…TORURU- YOU BASTAARDD!"

With that scream as the beginning, the enemy's attack against the supreme commander's former troops started. An air shooter volley fired at them diagonally from the back, coordinating with their allies, the soldiers in directly ahead of them also came charging in formation. The soldiers, deployed to attack and becoming attacked themselves, panicked and made a commotion, the majority being unable to adequately return fire.

"—They got us. Not bad, Torway…!"

In midst of that, Yatori still had the composure to assess the situation. –I see, at first glance, it appeared that all of the enemy's forces were deployed directly ahead, but they disguised the number using a concave line of battle. The ones who were left out of that were concealed at the sides of the path, and they opened fire the moment our main forces passed by.

A surprise attack from the sides by the troops in ambush. What Sariha had tried to pull off earlier was just pulled off in a similar fashion by the enemy. Yatori wasn't surprised. If it's Ikta, then she knew he'd do at least that much.

What she ought to be praising right now, was the gunning unmatched in accuracy that took Sariha down in just one hit. First, it was undoubtedly Torway's handiwork. When she thought of the skill that brought down the commander who was supposed to be in a safety

zone with one carefully aimed shot, she once again remembered the terror of the two soldiers of the name, “Remeon of the Bullet.”

“…First Lieutenant Sushuraf, Captain was ‘killed in action!’ Take over as the supreme commander!”

While stopping the main force of the enemy charging at them from the front, Yatori yelled to her only remaining superior officer. Whether to retreat to provide resistance, she couldn’t mobilize any platoon but her own with the authority she possessed. Now, as they were being partly sieged from the front and back, an immediate decision of their objective as a whole was essential.

“…Understood. We no longer have any prospect of winning this decisive battle. We’ll break their siege and escape into the trees.”

Saying that in a low voice, Sushuraf prepared the large-caliber air shooter he carried on his back with one hand, and fired it at the wall of enemy soldiers. The paint that spattered across a wide scope saw to four soldiers being “killed in action” in one shot.

“I created an opening. Wrench open that hole, Yatorishino.”

“—Roger that.”

Faced with adversity, a twisted smile rose to Yatori’s lips. It was simple and precise, but the execution was extremely difficult. This kind of order was exactly what she wanted.

Keeping control even now in this dire situation, Yatori’s platoon began moving and tore into the small seam in the siege. Repelling the enemies blocking their way, pushing their way through waves of people with abandon- in the end, though there were more injuries to their allies, she executed her order at last.

“Continue.”

From the prepared escape route, the platoon which Sushuraf was leading began withdrawing without a moment’s delay. However, the platoon which Sariha personally commanded, unable to recover from the initial confusion, was already destroyed. Less than one-third of the remaining two platoons was still surviving. To anyone’s eyes, this was a decisive rout.

As the defeated soldiers fled into the trees, Yatori suddenly creased her eyebrows as she escaped from the free-for-all fight,

“…First Lieutenant Sushuraf. The rule is that those ‘killed in action’ would remain where they are.”

The source of her confusion was being carried on Sushuraf’s shoulder. As if it were natural, the younger brother was carrying the older brother, who in a state of peace surpassing anger that had no relation to the fact that he’d lost all power as per the rules.

“If this were an actual battle, I would never desert my older brother. Even if he were a corpse.”

“—. I see.”

After hearing Sushuraf’s short words, Yatori didn’t pursue it further. She didn’t feel like

criticizing him for the breach of the rules. Just, if she were in the same position, what would she have done? -She thought a little about that inevitability.

“Mmm- aww, they didn’t let us destroy them…”

Watching the enemy disappear into the trees, Ikta lightly scratched the back of his head.

“Knowing Yatori, I did think that she might break through, you see. First Lieutenant Sushuraf’s shot which created the opening- now that was a bit unfair, no? Well, we have Torway on our side, so let’s call it even, shall we?”

Next to him, Sergeant Major Suuya nodded vaguely. Next to them, the soldiers, overjoyed at their victory, were in an uproar, and sending enthusiastic glances at their leader. But, that person ignored them and clapped his hands together.

“Alrigh~t, everyone settle settle. We let the enemy escape, but the mock battle ended with this. There’s no time left, so we won’t pursue them. –So Haro! Please give medical attention to the injured!”

“Wahh! W-we were found again!?”

Haro’s Medics platoon, timidly coming out of the trees, began looking after the injured persons that were mass produced in the recent battle. While watching that out of the corner of his eye, Ikta briefly surveyed the soldiers in front of him.

“With this, there’s no need to worry about the future. –Therefore, now is the time to scold my beloved subordinates. This is addressed to the team with no relation to whether you’re alive or dead. Well then, prepare yourselves!”

Saying that and putting his hands together, Ikta cracked his knuckles loudly. The soldiers were caught by surprise. They never would have guessed that he was the type of superior officer who engaged in corporal punishment.

“Private First Class Guemp! Private First Class Aigi! Private Vio! Corporal Dobai! Come before me!”

The four soldiers called by name nervously walked up to their superior officer. Ikta silently glared at them one by one before opening his mouth.

“The-four-of-you, even though I made such a point of it, stuck out too much when we charged. What’s the big idea? Do you want to be surrounded by the enemy? Are you masochists who love being sieged and destroyed by the enemy? Are you at the rebellious age? Basically, are you idiots? Do you want to die?”

The soldiers were dumbfounded. Usually, when one was reproved by one’s superior, there was nothing but yelling involved, and this nagging way of being scolded was rare. In addition, since there was this strange humor to be heard in it, they somehow ended up just listening to it.

“Keep doing that and you’ll die. If you jump out like that you’ll have to face three or four opponents at once with just one of you. I know of one person who call pull that kind of stunt off, but if you try copying that[4] you’re definitely going to die.

Do you understand? I’ll say it now since I have the chance. I don’t need any brave people

in Ikta-kun's unit. I'd much rather have lazy people. Instead of secluding yourself in the mountains and undergoing ascetic training so you can win one-vs-three, constantly think of ways you can fight three-vs-one in your bed. That's what you call a scientific way of thinking."

At this point, the person himself already forgotten what the point of the scolding was. What he said after was close to instinct.

"But I can't have you misunderstanding. Being lazy in the right way, is actually extremely difficult. When you're lazy in the wrong way, you'll accordingly end up having to work more than necessary. On the other hand, when you work the wrong way, you'll accordingly end up not being able to relax.

Well then. When you think these things through, both being lazy in the right way and working in the right way, don't you think that those two things end up being the same? It's kind of contradictory, no? Well, this, you see- actually it's not contradictory in the least, you see. ''Welcome to the world of science!''"

Science? What's that? – Commotion stirred among the soldiers. The only similar word which they knew of was "theology."[5] The word that had yet to be recorded in that world's dictionary was "science."

With a speaking style similar to that of a founder of a new religion, or rather ''with that very style itself'', Ikta continued.

"Logical and utilitarian, and as a result a fantastic way of thinking that lets you be extremely lazy. That is the essence of science.

You should think it over- how did humans advance this far? -Humans planted fields. Because it was a pain to go out hunting every day for unstable game. –Humans dug wells. Because it was a pain to go one by one to draw water from the river. –Humans coined money. Because it was a pain to carry around heavy goods to exchange them.

Conclusion. The evolution of humanity, all of it was led by the impulse of, 'I want to relax.' …If that is the case, what about war? Of course, war is also the same. That is to say, the 'relaxed war' is therefore the 'correct war!'"

Caught in a saturation attack, no one noticed that the logic in between skipped about five steps. And more frightening- Ikta himself had no definite self-awareness of his ability to incite others with rhetoric among his god-given weapons.

"So come with me! Whenever troops of Ikta Solork fight, we will be relaxed, and we will be victorious! Invincibility is standard, and laziness first-class! To those who follow me, I'll bring relaxation unto each and every one you!"

The moment he finished speaking, Ikta realized, "Ahh- whoops, I overdid it." But, it was already too late.

At first, all anyone did was stare dumbly in amazement, and the voice that disturbed the silence was truly a tiny one. However, that commotion slowly but surely was repeated and amplified among the soldiers. As a ripple arising from one point on water spreads across the entire surface while forcefully growing in height. The response of the soldiers who had received Ikta's grand address soon reached a final climax with cheering mixed with

applause—.

“”””””””YEEAAHHH! IKTA SOLORK! IKTA SOLORK!”””””””””

At his own name being chanted by countless overlapping voices, Ikta was overcome with surprise. Even though he had only thought to use this opportunity to earn the soldiers’ trust, he had far surpassed that goal before he realized it.

“Hey, what is this? …The triumphant return of some great hero…?”

Filled neither with joy nor with a sense of accomplishment, genuine chills ran down Ikta’s spine. There are two types of geniuses- someone thought that once. Thus, this might have been the first incident proving that- in that sense- Ikta Solork was not the same type as Anarai Khan.

“Wow- Ik-kun, you’ve become really popular when I wasn’t looking!”

Torway, who had been commanding the detached soldiers in ambush, had returned. However, Matthew twitched his cheeks and corrected his statement.

“No, he became really popular ‘’as you were looking’’…. What the hell was that speech before? The humor was simple, but there was a weird passion running through it. I mean, don’t go winning over the soldiers in our units too.”

“…Matthew, Ikemen…. No, sorry. I cast too wide a net with my preaching.”

Slapping his cheeks with both hands and bracing himself, Ikta returned his gaze to the problem at hand.

“A~lright- Everyone settle~. For the time being let’s just maintain our line of battle until time is called~.”

When Ikta requested silence with with his prolonged expressions, even the rowdy soldiers slowly quieted down. When adequate order returned to area’s atmosphere, Torway opened his mouth.

“…That reminds me. When we were hiding in the trees earlier, we saw Her Highness, Chamille.”

“Ahh- the princess? I thought that she wasn’t close by- so she was with the other side?”

“Yea, together with her bodyguards, she was walking west looking around restlessly for something…maybe she got bored of spectating and left?”

“—No, that would be strange.”

“Wha?”

“That princess has a strong sense of responsibility unbefitting her age. She wouldn’t do anything like leave the location when the deciding battle has yet to happen. If she were picking flowers, she’d probably swallow her pride and make do with somewhere close by. At the very least, it’s suspicious that she isn’t here right now.”

“That’s pretty exaggerated- it’s probably just a whim. Didn’t she just go to see Yatori?”

“The direction is fundamentally wrong. If that were the case, she’d be going south, not west, Matthew.”

“Then… maybe, she was looking for me?”

“I won’t say the chances are nonexistent, but they’re slim. Even if she notices the absence of Platoon Torway, then the princess would’ve realized that meant that you were lying in ambush for a surprise attack. Would she drag her bodyguards along when she goes looking there? She may be a princess, but she can read a situation.”

An uncomfortable feeling grew inside Ikta. Leaving the other two behind, he settled the question.

“…There is no reason. Yes, that is the biggest problem. At a point before the start of battle, there is no reason whatsoever for the princess to be heading west. If her objective in coming to watch the practice was simply to spectate, or to keep the Remeon brothers in check, for her to achieve that, she had to ‘be here.’ Nevertheless, she was ‘heading west’…”

Both of Ikta’s eyes opened wide. The next moment, he gave an unbelievable order.

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“…Nnn….”

With a cloudy consciousness, the princess felt like she was being carried on the back of a large turtle. The back she suddenly felt was nothing but hard, and massive. Though as the result of the drugs she inhaled, she didn’t retain the reasoning power to determine that it was light armor.

“I apologize for my impertinence, Your Highness, the Princess. Please wait a bit for now…”

The male bodyguard who was carrying her on his back, though not 10 minutes had passed since he swapped roles, didn’t know how many times he had already repeated the same apology.

“…Hey, sorry, I can’t do it anymore. Can you switch with me…?”

“…Ahh”

That this girl’s body, which was supposed to be as light as a feather, weighed as heavily as gold on those who carried her was not just the fault of their exhaustion from continuously walking inside the forest for a long time- not at all.

For humans born and raised in the Empire, the royal family was almost synonymous with the gods. As long as one wasn’t an extremist traitor, one couldn’t forget the respect due to those beings. …Even the ones committing these reckless actions were no exception to this spirituality as subjects of the Empire.

“…Please forgive me, Your Highness, the Princess. Please forgive me…”

When several minutes passed since he received the small body, an apology as such invariably came slipping out from the mouth of the human carrying her. Those continued to enter Her Highness’s ear, who was half asleep, and it recalled even to her dim consciousness the earlier events—.

“Where is he!? Where has Solork collapsed?!”

Not caring that her beautiful golden hair had become covered in tree leaves, Her Highness, the Princess, ran in search of the youth’s form. The impetus came about 10 minutes before, beginning with the report one bodyguard brought back. He told her, “the Medics soldier I met there was saying that Ikta Solork was bleeding and collapsed in the west.’”

From the moment she heard that, she lost her normal judgment. The belief that “Solork is at the northern entrance planning to summon and destroy the enemy forces” also vanished. Although she couldn’t confirm his figure from her location, and she had trust in her bodyguards, the major truth of it was that the human being Ikta Solork was the singular deciding factor for her. Recently when it came to matters involving him, reason was becoming slightly ineffective on Chamille. And before she knew it, she was being lured west to a place far removed from the main battle location, the northern entrance of Woodlands. However, her bodyguards also accompanied her for a while pretending to search for Ikta. Because they didn’t have confirmation that there was no other humans around.

No, on the contrary, there were a few people who were truly searching. It wasn’t that all of the 20 bodyguards were betraying her. However, the fact that they were only a fraction compared to villains was unavoidable, and what awaited them was a quite sudden tragedy.

“Wha…!? J-just what are you-“ “Y-your Highness, please esca…!“

An air shooter bullet released from behind pierced through the innocent body guards one after the other. …Even so, the ones who avoided instant death desperately tried to protect the princess. There were also those who, covered in blood, took the princess and continued to flee for several minutes.

However, their devotion made no difference. With the sound of compressed air being released, blood spilled from a fifth head, and the villains’ hands finally reached Her Highness, the Princess, with whom he had been escaping.

“Please forgive me, Your Highness, the Princess. We will be having you come with us.”

Beginning things with an apology, one of the villains declared their treachery. That man was a veteran soldier serving as the leader of the bodyguards, his name Ison Hou, who worked his way up the ranks to captain. He had strong faith in superior officers, enough to be entrusted with the protection of the princess, and he was given the stamp of approval by the upper echelon of the army in the screening process.

“…The story that Solork collapsed, was that a lie to lure me away?”

When that came out of the cornered princess’s mouth, she herself was surprised, but it was also a confirmation. Even at that time, still in a corner of her mind, the vision of Ikta lying prone and covered in blood remained.

“Yes. …Since it seemed Your Highness had taken an interest in him, we used it as a pretext.”

There was no sarcasm in Captain Ison’s phrasing, but Her Highness, the Princess’s cheeks

suddenly burned red.

“It seems I confused the order of my questions. –Why are you doing this?”

“…”

“Answer me! Do you have a rendezvous to uphold?!”

“Please forgive me. We know that Your Highness, the Princess, is innocent.”

Stubbornly not answering with a reason, Captain Ison only piled on more apologies. With that as a cue, other bodyguards came from behind him and surrounded her.

“S-stop! …Mmph!? MMPHH!”

Still, the princess, with a drug-laced handkerchief put over her mouth and nose, didn’t faint within a few seconds. She flailed her arms and legs for over three minutes and when he confirmed that she finally quieted down, Captain Ison gave and order to his subordinate.

“Carry her on your back. Sincerely try not to treat her too roughly.”

With that low, composed voice as the last thing she knew, Her Highness, the Princess’s consciousness became vague, and she saw only dreams of being carried by an enormous turtle from that point forward.

However, in her dream, she felt that the turtle was shedding tears. It was just like a turtle at the time of spawning…

-

Using the meeting location for times when they were routed for the second time in the span of one day, Captain Sariha had gone beyond both panic and anger, and was rather in a trance-like state.

“Older brother, I’m pouring it on your head.”

“…”

Concerned for his older brother who had paint sticking all over his head, Sushuraf poured water from a canteen and washed it off. Sariha himself said nothing as it was being done. Yatori found it quite ironic that the man who only made mistakes as the supreme commander, was exhibiting exemplary behavior as someone “killed in action.”

“-First Lieutenant Sushuraf, the time limit for the mock battle will pass soon. Won’t you send the signal of surrender?”

While measuring the inclination of her eyes, Yatori made the obvious suggestion. But, the moment the three-syllable word “surrender” came from her mouth, Captain Sariha yelled out forgetting his single good decision as a dead body.

“Here, surrender!? Don’t fuck around, who’s surrendering…!”

“…Captain. There’s no need to say it, but the current supreme commander is First Lieutenant Sushuraf.”

“The hell I’m listening to what a shitty warrant officer has to say! I’m not giving in- until I

beat the shit out of Toruru and Ikta Solork, I'll never surrender…!"

At the sight of her superior officer yelling and his spit flying, Yatori persuaded him in a soft tone.

"Captain, please listen. In any case, the mock battle will be over soon. If we don't send the signal of surrender now, it will only injure your honor, Captain, to be known as 'the commander who doesn't even know when he's lost.' At the very least, receiving that dishonor in a practice against new recruits wasn't your true intention as a Captain was it?"

"…"

"Now, you can still end the mock battle saying, 'I was completely cornered, but the last retreat was a success.' By acknowledging your loss, you can show your generosity. Do you understand? "

Sariha's voice lost its strength, and a shadow came over his downcast face. Yatori wrapped up her argument with a single phrase.

"Please give us your wise decision as supreme commander."

Even addressed as such, while hiding his face, Sariha's shoulders trembled slightly and he said nothing.

….However, if you looked closely, water fell in drops onto the collar of his army uniform from his downcast face.

Yatori gave a sigh and turned her body, and sat herself down on a fallen tree nearby. I wonder what Ikta would do if he were here- suddenly, she thought about that. Would he hit his dejected conversation partnerwhere it hurt?

"You can't do anything, can you? That guy, he's strict on men with pretty faces, so-"

The moment she muttered that and smiled, a metallic sound reached them coming from nowhere.

Those who understood the meaning of that sound, Yatori being the first, showed their surprise one by one and stood up.

"…A signal of surrender? Why are they-no, not just that…"

Quieting the clamoring soldiers with a sharp look, Yatori focused on her hearing. It was as if several signals with different meanings were being repeated. Not just a normal sound signal, this was certainly….

"…I see. I don't quite understand, but I've got it."

Rather than thinking about it too deeply, they should act. Making that judgment according to her natural intuition and dynamism, she made the soldiers in her platoon who were confused by the sudden situation line up in front of her.

"Excluding the 28 people we lost track of, total 12 people…it's a little flaky, but there's nothing I can do."

"Where are you going, Yatorishino?"

Before she requested for permission to depart, not Sariha but Sushuraf came asking

instead. Though she was slightly surprised at first, Yatori, judging that he had taken supreme command given Sariha's condition, informed him.

"Yatorishino Igsem with under 20 soldiers is now heading west."

"The signal just now?"

"Yes. I wasn't able to understand it completely, but in any case I fear that there is an emergency situation,"

"Understood. Take what's left of my platoon with you. Though the majority of them are exhausted. Hey-"

When Sushuraf began talking in a low voice, the air shooter soldiers who had been sitting in protest stood up, and joined the end of Yatori's files. At the extremely unexpected assistance, she widened her eyes and looked at the gigantic first lieutenant.

"If they get worn out during the journey, leave them."

"Naturally, I'll accept this privilege, but… Why are you letting me do this?"

"You saved my older brother in the first battle. I'm grateful for that."

His words were few, but in them was a simple reason that satisfied Yatori. She stretched her spine and bowed to the first lieutenant, and giving a final glance at Sariha, starting running as soldiers' vanguard.

-

"…What's that sound, ever since earlier?"

The 15 former bodyguards advancing through the forest, had long been puzzled about the metallic sound of unknown meaning that came ringing from afar. They thought that it had some meaning, but they could distinguish it no matter how hard they concentrated.

"Ignore it. Even if they noticed Her Highness, the Princess's disappearance, the training units have just finished their mock battle and lack a system of command. I can't imagine how that they could carry out an effective pursuit of us."

Now taking in one hand the princess who had circulated between his subordinates, Captain Ison stated his objective views. His voice was always low, heavy, and unwavering. The commander was constantly like this because he learned it from a revered superior officer very long ago.

"Just a little more, then we'll come out on the main road. The arranged cavalry is waiting for us there. Then we have achieved our mission."

"…That's right. Just a little, just a little more…"

Ison knew that his subordinates' hearts were wavering. They were likely thinking not that their mission would be over in just a little while, but that everything would be over. He didn't think that was impossible.

"If it's painful to look at the princess, then don't look anymore. You all should have been prepared at the start."

The captain’s strict words settled his subordinates whose hearts were wavering between loyalty and justice. That will tide them over, Ison judged. It was a prediction grounded on long years of experience. However, that was-.

“-Fire!” “…!?”

At approximately the same time as his short command, air shooter bullets and bow gun arrows came flying at them from all angles. Blood and scraps of fabric fluttered down, and two of the more unlucky people lost their footing and fell forward.

But, with the divine protection of their light armor, the remaining 13 soldiers got away either unscathed or with slight injuries. While sensing that that the enemy forces were small in scale, Ison took up a bow gun arrow that had lodged at his feet and gazed at it intently.

“…I can imagine it. In the place of arrowheads, they sharpened the tip of the wooden arrows, did they?”

Ison saw through various things in a few seconds. The enemy troops had fewer numbers than a platoon, and the larger part of their composition was accounted for by divisions other than the air shooters. It was obvious from the circumstances that they were training troops with no weapons meant for actual battle, their scheme to compensate for that was the bow gun arrow with a sharpened tip. It also seemed that the air shooter soldiers were firing paint bullets having made the gas pressure of the pressurized air the same as that when using real bullets, but the penetrative power of the bullets themselves was low and insufficient in strength.

As if the Captain’s composure had been contagious, and the other bodyguards weren’t agitated even as they received the assault. Surrounding the captain and the princess in a circle, they pointed the muzzles of each of the air shooters they prepared uniformly in all directions.

“You number fewer than a platoon, and I can gather that you are not air shooter soldiers. It is also highly unlikely that you are the Medics soldiers. If you were Illumination soldiers, you would use the darkness of the woods to your advantage and resort to blinding us with High Beams. Therefore, you are a Ballistics platoon which has lost its strength. –Correct, Warrant Officer Yatorishino Igsem?”

His somewhat cold observing eye made the soldiers hiding in the darkness of the trees shiver. Unimpressed with that reaction, Ison continued further.

“Well then, carry out a second volley. Even if one or two people die-“

“This time, you’ll know our positions- correct?”

That voice reached Ison’s ears along with the sound of shoe soles and dirt chafing together. At the exact same time, the blade of a saber was held to the nape of his neck.

“But, there is also this method of learning my position. The soldier uniform suits you, but aren’t you wearing your cap too low?”

“…So you were lying in wait up a tree? To unhesitatingly fly into the middle of the enemy, you’re quite the hero, Warrant Officer Igsem.”

Ison wasn't perturbed even in these circumstances, but as expected the same couldn't be said for his subordinates. Startled at the girl who suddenly appeared in the middle of the circle, they panicked and moved to turn the gun muzzles around, but Yatori didn't allow it.

"Don't move. If even a single gun is turned toward me, your leader's head falls."

"Then, let my head fall as you please. I order to all troops. Turn around immediately and fire at the girl."

Captain Ison showed absolutely no hesitation. But, again it seemed that there were no subordinates around him who could enact his order with the same resolve. It was as if a death god had completely reaped the proximity.

"…You narrowly escaped death. It seems that for as much as you think that way, they don't think it's right to let you die. It's complicated, but I think that you probably ought to be happy, Captain Ison Hou."

Captain Ison scoffed at his calculation error. Thinking a little, he settled on a simple resolution.

"We're deadlocked. But in your case, this is a desperate play for time, isn't it?"

"I'm not the only one being unfair. It's the same in your case, too."

"I've also wagered everything I've got, but you're giving a better show than I am."

They continued their farcical exchange in this tense atmosphere as if they were crossing swords. However, one change took place at that point. The princess who had been dozing off on Ison's back opened her eyes at Yatori's voice, which she had been accustomed to hearing.

"…Is that, Yatori? …Where…?"

"Greetings, Your Highness, the Princess. Is there anything strange about your body?"

Rubbing her sleepy eyes, and looking around, the princess gradually remembered the circumstances she had been left in, and when she realized the current encircled fighting ground situation, she then looked at Yatori with a face seeming on the verge of tears.

"It's alright, Your Highness, please be calm. It's the same as when you fell from the ship. He will save you soon."

"..B-but…Solork is…?"

Her secret hope chipped away at the remainder of her anxiety. Yatori smiled gently.

"Ikta will come soon. Excuse me, I was impatient. If only you had woken up a little later, he might have coordinated perfectly with Your Highness's awakening."

Seeing Yatori's smile, the princess quickly regretted her childishness. Entirely surrounded by gun-wielding enemies, under circumstances in which a millimeter of negligence was intolerable, of all things she was still concerned about someone else. How much courage that took, how much of a burden that forced the fiery-haired girl to bear, Her Highness, the Princess, couldn't even imagine it.

"…Hm. If Your Highness, the Princess, has awakened, then it's finally a good time to talk

about our motives, no?”

Ison was the one who proposed it. Not knowing his intention, Yatori made a severe expression.

“…Motive? You mean the reason you tried to kidnap royalty even as soldiers who pledged their loyalty to the Emperor?”

“Yes. The reason we completely abandoned our pride as soldiers, and took on this crime.”

There was no inflection of any sort in his tone. Even when it came time to speak his current beliefs, that remained the same.

“Then, I will tell you. We… the 15 of us including the two collapsed there, all of us were Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan’s disciples.”

The one who reacted most strongly to the mention of that name was the princess who stood behind the speaker.

“…What…did you say, just now…?”

“Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan, who suffered a death in battle at the end of hard fighting at the Eastern Stronghold about three months earlier, was our former teacher, is what I said, Your Highness, the Princess. Each of us had served many superior officers in our military careers, but there was no greater commander than he. That is something which we will always be able to declare.”

“…Don’t tell me, your motive is…”

The princess’s voice shook. Captain Ison’s left eye stared across his back at her face.

“That is right, Third Princess. One of our former teacher’s hundred million regrets, as he was made to be a human sacrifice to compensate for the mistakes of the internal government, WAS NOT BEING ABLE TO FULFILL ONE OF YOUR INSIGNIFICANT ORDERS!”

Ison shouted. He betrayed his inhuman impression in an instant, and blustered with completely unpredictable timing. The princess who felt that fierce intensity through her entire body, entered a state of panicked fear and began to struggle on Ison’s back. But, concerning the state of affairs, the fatal change was not this, but-

“”You finally revealed a hole in your defense, Warrant Officer Yatorishino.””

“…!?”

She withstood the sudden outburst. But she had been caught up by the condition of Her Highness, the Princess, who had fallen into a panic, and this time Yatori had let her concentration, which she couldn’t lose under any circumstances, slip for only a moment…!

He buried the tip of the blade into his palm. Amazingly, Ison had willingly plunged his right hand into the blade and prevented the saber’s movement. Furthermore, before the remaining main gauche swooped in, he held down Yatori’s left arm with his remaining hand. Thus throwing his opponent’s body off-balance, he flipped his enemy onto the ground with skillful martial arts…!

As if to signal its wielder's defeat, the main gauche which left Yatori's hand sounded as it fell to the ground.

On top of drawing out even an instant of vulnerability, he had a heart of steel that didn't hesitate to act when the chance arose. In the end, that was likely the reason for the failure of the "Igsem of the Blade" who prided herself in being the strongest in close quarters combat.

"See by nature I don't like to raise my voice, but…. Even still, I do try shouting once in a while."

"…, keh…!"

"There's no need to point your guns, you people. I can strangle her with one hand like this, so keep watch of our surroundings. Also, to her fire spirit partner, move and I kill your master."

Shia, who had slipped out of his hip pouch, faced Ison, and prepared to release flames from his 'fire chambers,' stopped in his tracks. Plainly stated, this was the perfect control of the soldier who was even thoroughly aware of the spirit's thought patterns.

"-Your Highness, the Princess, as well, don't consider jumping off my back since I have removed my hands. Though it was disrespectful, I fastened the string of your kimono while you were sleeping. Even if you tried to escape, it would be a wasted effort."

"S-stop! You, let Yatori…!"

Not curling up in fear and trying to rescue Yatori who was in a predicament by grabbing at the enemy, the princess's courage was something to be commended. She moved her hands to the captain's face from his back, and desperately dug into his skin with her nails. ..However, this attack was powerless against the man who had willingly pierced his hand with the saber, and he didn't move a single eyebrow.

"…Gah…ngh…High,ness…"

The carotid artery in her neck pressed under his finger, Yatori's consciousness gradually became faint from oxygen deprivation. But, as if to say he wouldn't wait for such a leisurely death, the strength in the captain's left hand increased. Ison's right hand, having flung the saber to the ground by force, stopped the body of the princess, who couldn't simply watch and jumped off his back, without even relying on the kimono string.

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A bloody wind overtook them.

One could even hear the creaking and groaning of her neck bones. Surely, this was the instant when she was on the verge of death- completely out of nowhere, Captain Ison's forehead started spurting blood.

"…Nn…?"

Losing feeling in his arms and legs, Captain Ison's body began to shake violently. Strength slipped out of his left hand, which would have broken his enemy's cervical vertebrae with another push. –That instant, Yatori, who had been held down, opened both eyes, and sprung up with all her energy. She almost instinctively took up her saber and main gauche

which were lying on the ground, and then-!

“AAAHHHHHH-!”

A bloody wind overtook them. Yatori, resurrected from the brink of death, regarded everyone within reach of her blades except the princess as an enemy, and, becoming a gale of blades, mowed them down.

In two seconds four people lost their heads, and in five seconds half of all of the body guards descended into a sea of blood. Her platoon would later tell the story as witnesses- that at this time, the swords which Yatorishino Igsem wielded exceeded the limits of a human being.

One beat behind her revival, the soldiers hidden in the shadows of the surrounding trees also began their charge. There was already no means of fighting against the former bodyguards who’d been ripped apart by Yatori from the inner side. Piercing eyes or gaps in their armor with bow gun arrows- when they faltered it had been carried out one by one by Yatori’s two blades.

Not two minutes after the start of their charge, they were annihilated. …After that, only the fiery-haired girl standing dazed in the sea of blood, and her Highness, the Princess, whose body she completely bathed in the blood she brought forth, surrounded by the horrified soldiers standing around them, were left remaining in the center of the battlefield.

“A-are you unharmed, Yatori-sa…!?”

“Hey, just what the hell happened—WOAH!?”

Rushing in one after the other came Torway, who rescued Yatori from her predicament earlier with a single magnificent shot from afar, and Matthew. But even they lost their words at the sight of their ally dyed completely red with blood.

“…High,ness…. …Are, you, safe?…. Thank…goodness…”

The demonic swordsman’s stiff lips spoke human words with great difficulty. With that, Yatori finally noticed that there were no longer any enemies she needed to kill surrounding her. She tried to store her two swords in their sheathes, but even they had been torn off her hip in the course of battle. She tried to at least free her hands, but, as if they had fused with the hilts, her fingers didn’t move.

“What’s this…The swords, won’t…”

“Ya…Yato,ri…”

Even the rescued princess was frightened of that figure. She was frightened, but she thought that there was likely nothing else so beautiful, so fleeting, or so noble. She was the pair of blades. To protect her master- she was her blades of pure steel wielded with that being her dearest wish as one titled an Imperial Knight.

“—Woah, being flashy again, are we? I won’t be able to eat tomatoes for a while, seeing this.”

However, there was the youth who nonchalantly stepping into that red domain with a complaint. His short breath and sweaty skin told that he had come running here at full

strength.

“…Ik,ta…?”

When the fiery-haired girl turned her blank gaze, Ikta casually raised a hand.

“Yo, Yatori, there’s something important I need to tell you. You might already know it, though… Right now, you’re really red, you know?”

What am I going to do if this fails?- entirely not worrying about that before he spoke was one of Ikta’s amazing points. And strangely, the jokes he told in extreme situations were able to calm people’s hearts.

“…Haha… Th-the red, is fine, but… I can’t stand, reeking of metal from head to toe…”

“Reek of metal? No~, that has nothing to do with being red. That’s because you’re holding those hunks of metal in both your hands.”

Saying that as if were obvious, Ikta came in front of Yatori and gently massaged not her fingers clutching the hilts but the muscles of her forearm. After he continued that for a minute, strength left her stiffened hands and the swords that had practically integrated with them separated from her palms and fell.

“There, I got it. That’s enough for today.”

“…Thank, you…. …But, what- right….I might be, a little tired…”

Saying that with a wry smile, she fell forward, leaning her body on Ikta, and lost consciousness.

Not caring that she was covered in blood as he held and supported her, the youth murmured as if he were disgusted.

“You always work too hard, you know. I tell you to be more relaxed about things, but you really don’t listen, do you?”

Entrusting her to the soldiers, Ikta turned a second time to the center of sea of blood. The princess, hugging her knees, hoped he would talk to her, but his goal was elsewhere.

“…You’re alive, aren’t you? You there, can you still talk?”

Ikta’s words were directed at Captain Ison, who laid collapsed on his face. To tell the truth, Her Highness, the Princess, was hurt by the order of his priorities, but at any rate his concern was for the dying soldier.

“…I can’t see anymore, but yes, somehow…. Your voice, you’re Warrant Officer Solork, right…?”

“And you are the leader of the body guards, Captain Ison. May I have an explanation of this situation?”

Finding it unbearable that Ikta asked for that reason out of Captain Ison’s mouth, the princess forcibly interposed her own words.

“It seems that they were Lieutenant Hazaaf Rikan’s disciples….all of the 15 people here…”

In the end, it was painful for her to say any more than this. Hearing that, Ikta's face distorted in rage, furthering the princess's regret.

"…If that's all there is, then I understand very well. I have no will to ask or criticize you for any more. I believe that I also understand you feelings. If you had been so inclined, I would've liked if you'd invited me as one of your allies."

"Just- Ikta, what-!?"

Matthew, who had yelled without thinking, might have done better to praise his good sense. Ikta had just now committed two reckless actions. The reckless action of saying that in the presence of royalty, and the reckless action of saying that in the presence of Chamille.

"Even though I say that, I have regrettably delayed your plan. That a man like you would commit such extreme actions, means that you definitely have a detailed, magnificent plan together with several of your allies. Your final objective is either to threaten or to overthrow the cabinet. It's really disappointing. I don't know how far you could have gone, but even still if you would have pulled it off, it'd be something that I'd have wanted to see."

Ikta continued to talk feverishly, and Ison made a puzzled face.

"…Can I, ask one thing, Warrant Officer Solork…?"

"Ask me two or three, however many you'd like. There are no strings attached to the compassion I offer you."

"…Why were we, caught by you here…?"

Ikta bit his lip. That was a very humble question for one on the brink of death. Why wasn't it more selfish? This man had the authority to tear down the gods.

"…If that is your wish, then I will speak. First, you tried to kidnap the princess from the vicinity of the northern entrance of the Woodlands. Torway just happened to witness that, but… the timing of the execution wasn't bad. Since, as you had predicted, our awareness was concentrated on the mock battle.

"If you are fleeing with someone from around the northern entrance, then it's fastest to come out onto a main road from the west of the Woodlands. The northern entrance is out of the question because Ikta's group is hiding out there, it is difficult to cut across to the southern entrance, and going to the east, on top of it being a detour, also has the danger of running into someone.

"…Therefore, your escape is from the west. That comes with one condition, though- if you recall the topographic map of that area, then your route is restricted even further. The northwest side of the Southern Urt Woodlands faces the Tahbai Mountain Range. Of course a mountain path crosses through them, but there is no way that people who want to get out on a main road as quickly as possible would do anything like climb a mountain. They would follow the base of the mountain as closely as possible, and go from the first road they come upon to the main one, right? That is right here."

"…I can, acknowledge that. However, how did Warrant Officer Yatorishino cut us off…?"

That was the part Ison wanted to hear more than anything else. Because, they had aimed for the height of the mock battle when they executed the kidnapping to avoid being pursued after their crime.

“When we realized the possibility that the princess was kidnapped, The four of our troops-mine, Matthew’s, Torway’s, and Haro’s- were at the northern entrance of the Woodlands. There was a high probability that we wouldn’t make it in time from there. What I thought then was to send a sound signal to the other troops who were closer to you than we were and have them make haste for the west.”

“…We couldn’t make sense of it, but… that sound really was a signal…”

“Well if it were an Imperial-style signal, then it would also be transmitted to you people. That was a Kioka-style light signal translated into sound. It’s something that I used to use with Yatori since a long time ago when we made mischief during lessons, and I was confident that I could transmit something in just about secrecy with it. Though after that, it was a tossup between whether their marching speed could overcome their time loss…With that, I’ve revealed how we cut you off, but you weren’t able to move at top speed yourselves, were you?”

Ison nodded slightly. The desperate resistance from the members who had not betrayed Her Highness, the Princess, delayed the time of their transition from kidnapping to escaping. In addition to that, the feelings of guilt they had toward the act of kidnapping royalty slowed the feet of the members more than he had imagined.

“…I understand the majority of it. Then, my last question…Warrant Officer Yatorishino’s platoon position was closer to ours, did you know that when you sent the signal? Or did you leave that to luck?”

“That was completely luck-I don’t intend to disappoint you by saying that. I knew.”

“…Why? Warrant Officer Yatorishino’s platoon should have been your enemy’s ally in the mock battle…”

“When I sent that signal, we had just finished the deciding battle at the northern entrance, and the enemy troops had become scattered as they withdrew. At that time, it was a theory that they headed for the ‘universal destination’ they’d previously established among their allies and refocus their forces. …And, I had an idea where the enemy’s ‘universal destination’ would be before the mock battle started.”

In the Southern Urt Woodlands, there aren’t many places in which three platoons numbering 120 people could assemble. The open area in the north was exemplary, but as the location where the confrontation of armies was expected to occur, that would be essentially inviting the enemy to please pursue them. A place with enough space for their entire army to assemble, but hidden so that it’d be difficult for the enemy to find them… in that case, the majority of prospects were unbalanced to the ‘’west or northwest’’ of the Woodlands.

“I couldn’t pin down for sure where it was, but that just that was enough this time. Since because they were at the west or northwest of the Woodlands, Yatori’s platoon was much closer to you than we were in the north. –That is all, there are no more secrets to disclose. Though it’s not much of a souvenir for the underworld.”

Ikta finished speaking without any sense of accomplishment. Captain Ison's lips slowly curved.

"…Warrant Officer Solork… on the map inside of you, surely, the entirety of your own troops and those of your enemy continue to move in real time based on the rules of 'possibility,' right…?"

"…I would like to think so."

"…I see, is that right? If that's the case then I accept my loss… It seems that your way of thinking in regards to your tactics, is fundamentally the same as those of Lieutenant General Rikan. …It that really a coincidence…?"

"That's-"

Not a coincidence- Ikta couldn't say it. He couldn't say that it was because Hazaaf Rikan was the great commander who had taken over Bada Sankrei's role. That even if their times were different, they were comrades who carried in their chests an ideology from the same source- no matter what he couldn't say it here.

The youth, who was supposed to say what he wanted to say when he wanted to say it, lost all words in the gap between what he wanted to bring to his mouth and what he wanted to keep secret.

"…, Ahh-…"

When Ikta, searching of words and being quiet for a long time, incidentally took notice, Captain Ison was no longer breathing. The youth grit his teeth- even though he said that there were no strings attached to his compassion, ultimately he couldn't offer any suitable words even at the very end….

"Ik-kun, it's over. Come, everyone, let's go back."

Torway approached his back as he stood dead still, and lightly tapped his shoulder. By reflex, Ikta suddenly nodded. It seemed that, so much that he even wanted to return to that hateful military base, his heart had been exhausted.

"…Securing the accomplices, who are sure to be on the main road…"

"Our opponent's precise location, there are several…if we don't know any then it's difficult. It's not the work of troops in training."

"..I guess you're right. Let's hurry and go back, and complain about how our food never has any variety. …Ahh, these were a tiring two days. The time when we survived in Kioka was so much better than this."

By complaining and stretching, Ikta pulled himself together just a little. And, then finally, he looked for a certain someone's seated blood-spattered figure. Though she had entered his line of sight before then, she hadn't actually entered his consciousness.

"Ah- Yo, Princess. You've reinvented the flashy dress again. …Mm, or did you just magnificently spill tomato sauce on yourself? It's pret~ty hard to tell, you know."

Ikta recovered his usual groove. –However, he wasn't aware of it. Of how much he had ignored the princess's feelings thus far. Not hearing a single one of the words she wanted

him to say to her, and being struck only with words she didn’t want him to say, one wondered just what kind of state she was in right now.

“And by the way, I won’t mention it anywhere else, but I’ll tell you privately in secret…. Princess, right now, you’re really red.”

What am I going to do if this fails?- entirely not worrying about that before he spoke was one of Ikta’s amazing points. And mysteriously, the joke he spit out in extreme situations, they had he strange effect of calming people’s hearts. Well, that being said-.

“Wa….WaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

“H-Huh? Wh-Why!?”

“WAAAaaAAAAAHHHHH! Solork-SOLORK YOU MEANIEEE! MEANIEE! WaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

There were limits to this magic depending on the situation, the youth learned that here together with great consideration. Be he a genius or a hero, at the very least he was not omniscient.

Concerning the disastrous spectacle following Her Highness, the Princess explosion, it did not remain in records of the countless tragicomedies that were supposed to happen in that time. It was just a short scribble- “five hours until she cried herself out and fell asleep”- in the diary of only one person, Haroma Bekkel, but that might be an understatement of the fierceness of the final battle.

At any rate, among the endlessly tumultuous waters, the curtain closed on the first practice. After they received the report from Ikta and the others after they returned to the center base, several of the High Grade Military Officers who were involved with the body guard selection were fired. All of the perpetrators died, and even in the following investigation the full particulars of Captain Ison’s plan ultimately weren’t made clear.

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Yatori Igsem, who had upgraded the number of people she killed with her hands from one digit to two in a mere day.

After sleeping for one night, she completely recovered to her former condition, and returned to the base properly commanding her troops on the road back from the practice. Treating her life and death struggle with Captain Ison as a thing of the past and not drawing it out, she even clearly divided her complicated feelings about killing her compatriots between her ethics and responsibility as a soldier without regret.

The strength of her spirit, served to strengthen even further the faith the subordinates in her platoon held in her as a commander.

“….Hss…!”

However, in a part of herself that she didn’t show to her subordinates, there was an aspect

of her that had changed. While wielding her two blades in an indoor training ground with no other sign of human life, Yatori was trying to recall the sensation from “that time.” … That, most likely, was because she thought that it was one “predicament.”

The memory of a sword fight carried out in a red haze. Excess thoughts vanishing from her oxygen-deprived mind, the existence called Yatori was purified into the blades she held in her hands. The blades which dashed ahead of her thoughts were shockingly efficient, and human minds might possibly think too much about things to manipulate simple tools such as swords- Yatori was in the process of reaching this unusual philosophic view.

“Myself, in essence a knight; a knight, in essence a sword; a sword, in essence myself-was it? There’s a small part I can’t understand, Father. The reason why the word, “human” isn’t included in that.”

Ending her usual introspection, Yatori sheathed her two swords in the scabbards on her hips. The fire spirit Shia, who had been let down on the floor, watched her condition staring intently from afar, but— exceedingly rare for the reticent partner, he unexpectedly started a conversation with his master himself.

“-Yatori. Do you think that Shia is a flame?”

“…Huh? What nonsense are you saying? Shia is Shia, right? My one and only partner in the world.”

Answering back without hesitation, Yatori walked toward her scene partner and picked up the small body. She made Shia’s deep red head nod slightly.

“Then Shia doesn’t think that Yatori is a sword either.”

“…Thank you. For worrying about me.”

For the partner whose forte wasn’t complex phraseology, that was the best advice he could give. Yatori was grateful from her heart, and honestly accepted his consideration.

“I’m alright, really. I honestly don’t know whether or not I’ll be in that predicament again, but… This time, there was a guy who dragged me down in a second from the heights of my sword which I had finally reached.”

Yatori faintly smiled. …After she cut down all enemies, most people hesitated to call out or get close to her. However, that was not the fear one held for a murderer; rather, was it not an expression of the awe one held for a drawn sword? That had the air of respect— only, held not for a human but for a sharp-edged sword.

Yatori didn’t loathe being seen as a sword. To the contrary, that was exactly what she wanted. Therefore, she truly didn’t harbor any ill will towards the people who couldn’t approach her at that time. That was not only based on reasoning- she completely felt that way based on her emotions as well. That was the refreshing part of the human called Yatori.

However- when she thought of her companion who had walked up to her without wavering at that time and gently disconnected the swords which had bonded to the palms of her hands, there was no small number of things to think about. Warm feelings welled up

in her chest.

“As long as I am by Ikta’s side, it doesn’t seem like I’ll be able to completely turn into a sword. …Well, I suppose that’s fine, too. I mean, swords don’t have working mouths, and living on without playing the straight man to his antics is simply impossible for me.”

Yatori left that place with seemingly joking but undoubtedly sincere final words.

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At the same time, a youth, who not to the same degree as Yatori but nonetheless upgraded the number of people he killed with his hands by one, readied his air shooter in an indoor shooting range.

“…Whoosh…Whoosh…Whoo-!”

The carefully aimed shot pierced through distant, far-off targets one by one. –If he had been the Torway of old, this would have been when he would be conflicted: “Aren’t I doing it wrong? Aren’t I just afraid of the enemy getting close?” The sense of values planted in him like a curse by his older brother Sariha made him do that.

But, he used the real bullets which he habitually carried around as protection for his commander, and by shooting Captain Ison the moment he entered within range, he had saved Yatori’s life as a result- this reality was big for him. The situation which continued to worry him until now, the reality that he had taken a single person’s life, he could thrust it into a corner of his heart.

“…It’s fine this way. Yes, it’s better this way.”

While peering through the sight of his air shooter, Torway came to terms with himself. –His weakness, that “his accuracy rate drops when the target is close,” was quite visible in situations when his target was an animal, and especially when it was a human. In actuality, that was the result of his kind nature.

No matter what, he couldn’t classify a being that was close enough for him to feel its presence as a “target.” That’s why his aim wavered. It’s not as if everyone could live as refreshing a life as Yatori’s, and with the impossibility of that exchange, Torway was more Yatori’s antithesis than anything.

His kindness, which made the index finger wrapped around the trigger weaken when he was in front of an enemy, was of course undoubtedly a defect as a soldier. But, the Torway of the present had found the possibility of complementing it.

“I wonder why I hadn’t realized it. …Until now, we had only thought of distance as an obstacle to shooting. But if you really think about it, isn’t there more merit if there is a greater distance between you and your opponent?”

First, it is difficult for the enemy’s bullets to hit you. Second, it is difficult your position to be discerned by your enemy. And third, due to the first and second reasons, ‘’you can approach shooting with peace of mind’’. Torway thought that any one of them was too precious an advantage to give up. On the contrary, he even imagined that if he reached further with those as merits, ‘’might he not end up establishing a new branch of the army’’?

“…This way of thinking, it will definitely add a new page to the history of “gun warfare.” That is something I’ve always wished to do as a one of the Remeon Family. Of course, that won’t change now. But…”

When his thoughts reached that point, there was something that Torway just couldn’t help but thinking about. It was Ikta’s goal, serving as supreme commander at the time of the mock battle, when he deployed Torway at the river crossing point upstream of the Kuriri River. Officially, his orders were, “when the enemy troops come here, aim at the enemy general and fire from the treetops.” But thinking about it now, ‘’he couldn’t believe that Ikta had estimated there being a high possibility of the leader of the enemy platoon passing through there.’’

“The one which would move to intercept my unit would likely be Yatori-san’s platoon- you had read that from the beginning. In that case, hadn’t you predicted that Yatori would leave her main force at a point midway, and send only scouts upstream?”

Upstream, Torway’s detached force killing of three enemy soldiers hadn’t served to contribute that great of an influence in the grand scheme of the war. If that was that case, then he thought that remaining at the river defense encampment and leading the platoons’ charge would have been much more effective. And that there was no doubt that Ikta had also come to this realization.

“…I wonder if I’m overthinking it…. But, no matter what, I have no choice but to think that your intention in deploying me upstream was to increase my ‘experience in shooting distant enemies.’ At the river defense encampment, after the general offensive had started there wouldn’t have been an opportunity for me to shoot at the enemy while keeping my distance. If Yatori’s intervention had come later then, it wouldn’t have been farfetched for the mock battle to have been settled right there. Therefore…”

Torway, who had stopped shooting and turned his body around, gazed far away at the barracks where they were lodging. First, he murmured his appreciation, and his awe amounting to double the former.

“Hey, Ik-kun…. My weaknesses and my worries, and the things I want to do… Even though until now I haven’t told you once to your face what they were.

Ever since a long time ago, you’ve understood everything, haven’t you…?”

-

Also at the same time, in the lounge of the barracks, Matthew Tetdrich and Haroma Bekkel were playing shogi face to face. Their abilities were on par with each other, and currently Matthew was somehow leading with three wins and two losses. This time, they were also deadlocked in a situation which didn’t allow either one to relax his or her guard, but….

“…Here, with a reverse checkmate, 5-8 Illumination battalion! With this it’s checkmate in three moves! No doubt about it!”

“You noticed that!? Ahh, umm….th-there’s nothing, I’ve lost…”

At Haro’s resignation, the round-faced youth huffed a sigh of relief. Though they were

both warrant officers, that she- part of the Medics- fell behind in shogi had something to do with the Tetdrich Family's reputation.

"And to think that I was the best at Nursing School…. Matthew-san, you're really good at this, you know. I haven't properly learned how to deal with established tactics."

"Well, this is about as good as I am…. It's frustrating that I can't brag about winning against you, Haro."

"All of a sudden you're kicking the loser while she's down!? Umm, if you're going to say that, then please challenge the Big Three! Ah, including Her Highness, the Princess, is it now the Big Four? Anyway, if you can win against any of them, then you can brag a whole lot!"

The term Big Three or Big Four was a ranking of shogi ability of those among the Order of Knights- or more precisely, it was a subdivision. Ikta, Yatori, Torway, Her Highness, Chamille- if those four, their winning rate aside, fought amongst each other, it would become "a true battle." When the two, Matthew and Haro, fought seriously with them, "the battle was a farce."

"The Big Four, huh…. Well, if even if the princess is a special case… the rest of them…"

Haro drew her eyebrows at the condition of Matthew, who was grumbling in a low voice while fiddling with a game piece in his hand.

"…Huh? It seems like, you've entered a relatively severe downer…?"

"…Not really, this isn't just limited to shogi, you know. You could say it's a more universal problem…Even you feel it, don't you, Haro? How do I put it, with them, umm, that…"

"? Umm…Ah! A difference in status, is it!?"

"That's right, but you should pay more attention to your slips of the tongue! Ikta, who does it consciously also come to mind, but since you're a natural airhead saying it without any ill will, I'm stuck on who to take my anger out on!"

"Ah, I-I'm sorry! I have this bad habit that, by the time I notice, my mouth has already rushed ahead, and…."

"I know that from experience, you know…. But, how do I put it? Since we're both already Warrant Officers in the High Grade Military Officer course and our contest to climb the ranks has started, you need to be less innocent."

Matthew spoke half shocked and half impressed. Haro tiled her head a little, then gave a wry smile.

"That's- If you say that kind of thing, it seems like I should be offended, but I don't really want to climb the ranks or anything, and…. Since with our current wages, I can send an allowance home…"

"Ahh, the way you said that, if I had heard that before the Exam I would have gotten angry. I would have shouted, 'With an incentive like that, go apply for a different job!'- probably."

“Ahaha…. Then, Matthew-san do you want to climb the ranks even now? To a general or to General of the Army?”

Beyond doubt Haro thought that he would answer immediately, but strangely Matthew drew his eyebrows and hesitated to respond.

“Eh? M-Matthew-san…?”

“…I want to, you know. I want to climb the ranks. It’s frustrating that it doesn’t feel realistic, but I do want to become a general or the General of the Army. Since that’s why I took the High Grade Military Exam.”

He was a little late, but the answer she imagined did come back and Haro was relieved. However, from that moment, Matthew was somewhat fidgety and had lost his composure, and after five minutes passed he rose from his seat.

“Huh? Where are you going, Matthew-san? There’s still time until dinner, you know.”

“…Whenever I move, it’s necessarily because of my appetite?”

“Ah, um, was I wrong!?”

“…. I’m going to the Library of Military Annals. I want to investigate a little in detail about river defense encampments.”

“Ah, studying tactics? You really are diligent, aren’t you? Please do your best!”

Turning his back to the idiotic encouragement, Matthew left the lounge alone. His gait as he walked the corridor was strong, even rough, and in his round face, his eyes were tinged with the light of determination.

“I haven’t given up yet. Be it shogi, climbing the ranks, or status. I’m too young to be thinking crap like ‘this is my limit.’ There is the saying, great talents mature late. Even if tomorrow isn’t good enough, after one year, after five years, after 10 years- how things will turn out by then, no one knows that.”

Making the soldiers he passed by move aside with his intensity, he was riled up against an opponent who wasn’t there.

“Just watch me, Ikta, Yatori, Torway. I’ll win the next one. If I don’t, then I’ll win the one after. …Count on it- one day, I’ll show you the true power of Matthew Tetdrich!”

-

At the same time as Matthew’s inspiration, Ikta was standing at the north-most point of the center base. Alone in the darkness of night, he was standing still with an expression that told of boredom. He might have been waiting for someone, but his scene partner immediately appeared riding in a carriage.

“Don’t make me wait. Solork, board.”

Making the coachman open the door and seated inside the carriage herself, the princess called out to him. Ikta’s face distorted into a miserable one for an instant, but he entered

into the carriage obediently without cracking any jokes.

“Look at your clothing- the collar of your shirt is twisted. There’s also sand stuck to your pants. Brush it off.”

“…Mm…”

“In the first place, your face is slovenly. Even if you can’t help that your looks are mediocre, there is practically none of what you’d call youthful ambition on your face. Even if I introduce this scrawny man as an ‘Imperial Knight,’ it will only be taken as a joke. Do you plan to embarrass me? Correct yourself at once.”

“…Mm…”

“Stiffen your lips more- straighten your spine and face forward. Rather straighten your back! Wear an aura of a gifted person overflowing with wisdom at a young age, express your highly perfect character that’s overflowing with gentlemanliness and chivalry with the color of your eyes! For goodness’ sake can’t you show some spirit without having to rely on the angelic Kusu!”

“Don’t list fundamentally impossible demands! Just how much of an unrivaled, all-rounder gentleman act are you going to demand from me!? Understand that Ikta-kun, no matter how much he dresses up, is still Ikta-kun!”

Ikta lashed back after his considerably unreasonable act, but seeing the princess’s shoulder tremble, he realized his blunder.

“Y-you disobeyed me… You disobeyed my orders… You have no intention of upholding your promise, do you…?”

“No, I do I do, I do intend to! For goodness’ sake, please say whatever you want- if it’s what you want I can straighten my back, see! If you tell me to, then I’ll even fire beams from my eyes!”

“Then cough up your heart from your mouth.”

“That’s telling me to die, isn’t it!? Surely, that wording is taking advantage of my mood right now, isn’t that it is!?”

Her moody saturation attack fatigued Ikta with great vigor. Five minutes after they departed, he had already completely used up all of his willpower and laid his body horizontally on the seat.

“This is tedious, amuse me more! “

“..I can’t give you a reaction anymore… Feel free to boil or burn me…”

“Oh? You said it. Then I’ll insult you as I like. This gutless, sophist, insensible, sex-crazed. …Umm, uhh…”

“…Your Highness, it appears that your vocabulary is quite meager…”

“A-are you making fun of me?! It’s just that there are few words that describe you well! A-and, there’s one I have in reserve. I thought that if I said it, you’d definitely become angry, so I restrained myself, but if you’re going to say that to me, then I’ll go and say it, too!”

“..Please. If it’s something to do with me, then say whatever…”

“…M-mother complex!”

Compared to how much she hesitated, what she said was anticlimactic. Covering her ears and shrinking in on herself, the princess timidly looked toward Ikta.

“….Y-you’re not angry?”

“No, even if I get angry or whatever, that’s the plain truth so I don’t feel insulted…”

“B-but, when I talked about your mother before this…”

“? …Ahh, you mean right after the conferring of decorations? That was because you, princess, brought up my mother’s name in an unpleasant context. Therefore, please stop insulting my mother. I made a promise, so I won’t get angry, but on the other hand, that’s because I can’t say a single thing back.”

Ikta wove his hand while sleeping. The “promise” that the two of them had been mentioning since earlier, was a bargaining chip which the youth had no choice but to play to make Her Highness quiet down from her grand explosion immediately following the kidnapping. Ikta had already been bound by his promise of, “I’ll listen to whatever you say for one month starting today,” for two weeks.

“…I won’t say anything. If you can’t answer me back, then I’d be troubled.”

She might have been afraid to harm her companion’s mood, but Her Highness, the Princess, suddenly became submissive and sunk into silence. A hush overcame the inside of the carriage. She had no desire at all to do anything about Ikta’s impudence.

“…Solork, please listen. I have something serious to say.”

The quality of her voice changed. She might have attained the mental preparation to break the ice in the silence until now, but the princess’s face was unusually serious. Not having a choice, Ikta also raised his upper body from the seat.

“My inviting you today, it was an invitation to the party taking place in the capital, but this conversation is the main point.”

“…”

“Including the incident of the attempted kidnapping, I have had my life saved by you three separate times. Of course, I am grateful, but… more than that, I feel as though I have no reason to hide anything from you anymore.”

Hearing that introduction, Ikta snorted with a face that said he long been tired of waiting.

“Are you finally going to spill your tiny guts?”

“I don’t think anything good will come of keeping you in suspense. However, postponing it so I could evaluate you was necessary. I didn’t think that it would be over in just a few months, and was prepared to spend an entire year on it, but…”

Ikta stopped the princess, who was getting ready to cut directly to the crux of the matter, with one hand.

“Please wait. Before you go to the main point, there is something I want to ask first.”

“…What’s that?”

“This situation, we’ve been in it before, haven’t we? After the unforgettable conferring of decorations at the Holy White Temple, we boarded a carriage together with you, and exchanged words in private.”

“…So, what about that?”

“So what about that? -don’t give me that. Something that was present then, that isn’t here with us now, right?”

Not allowing the princess to talk her way out, Ikta questioned her clearly.

File:Alderamin v01 323.png

Ikta’s black eyes glared at his companion as if gauging her. The princess gulped loudly, and opened her heavy mouth.

“Hey, Your Highness, why didn’t you invite Yatori here, too? If you’re saying that you have no reason to hide anything anymore because your life was saved, then no matter how I think about it, she should have been invited too. In other words, the one among us who most demonstrated her loyalty to you, is beyond doubt Yatori. Don’t tell me that you’ve forgotten that image.”

Remembering the image of Yatori as she stood motionless in a sea of blood with two blades in hand, Her Highness the Princess bit her lip looking ashamed.

“…That’s right, Yatori is a loyal soldier in the true sense. I learned of that firsthand during that incident. …However, for that very reason, I can’t invite her to this place.”

“I’m unfit to be a loyal soldier or something, so you want to have me assist you? So that’s it, I’m satisfied.”

Ikta lashed out with cruel sarcasm. The princess shook her head sideways with her face on the verge of tears.

“You’re wrong, that’s not it…! That you’re a talented person turned to dirty work or anything, I haven’t thought that even once! Rather it’s the opposite- you have purity of a kind other than Yatori’s! That’s what I…!”

“Well, it’s fine. I’m a human who just says what he wants to say one after the other. But, for some reason, it seems that there’s a part of me that Your Highness has bought. Let me hear your question.”

Ikta’s black eyes glared at his companion as if gauging her. The princess gulped loudly, and opened her heavy mouth.

“…You. What do you think of the current state of the Katjvarna Empire?”

“It’s in the latter half of its decline. If I put it simply.”

“That’s quite harsh. However, I completely agree. …Compared to its golden age over 100 years ago, our industry is running down over-all, our national power is weakening, and yet, out of balance, only our military power has been on the rise. And as the Empire has

become thin and weak, the neighboring Kioka Republic has emerged and prospered."

"The Kioka Republic has been handling both its internal and diplomatic affairs quite well. At the very least, the Empire's cabinet is currently using its damned foolishness perfectly. The one who let Kioka, a small country which had originally seceded from the Empire, which had been no more than a small, weak country neighboring a powerful one, flourish thus far is in one sense the Empire itself."

The princess put Ikta's reasons for only making that judgment into words.

"'The definition of the government in the Katjvarna Empire is to compensate for the failures of the Cabinet through war.'"

"That's a nice summary. Yes, that's exactly right. If you recall the incident at the Eastern Stronghold before this, it's easy to understand using that as an example. The Cabinet pushed their failure, 'failure in pioneering,' onto Kioka through some military tricks, the 'apparent defeat.' …So to speak, in this country, ''it's as if all of the debt ultimately circles around to the army.'"

"Yes. You might even call that their overarching principle… That's exactly why soldiers are valued in this country. Because they take on the responsibility of the political failures perpetrated by the Imperial Family, and bear the role of settling wars."

"For the Imperial Family, the Imperial Army is a convenient trash can that will automatically incinerate the garbage they throw into it. With this setup, statesmen don't have to take responsibility for the policies they enacted themselves. That's why it's corrupted. It's become so that whatever they do, they think that war will resolve it for them. The Cabinet had become a den of thieves for influential aristocrats who have nothing in their head except laying down commoners' clothing, and, making the emperor into a figurehead, growing old while not carrying out any of their responsibilities as leaders."

The princess nodded sharply. Scorn and hatred towards her biological father surfaced in her eyes.

"The current emperor- the human known as Emperor Arshankrut Kitora Katjvanmaninik, if he should completely cast off that emperor's crown, he would be nobody. He was just a depraved, dimwitted, and hot-tempered man. He might not have been that way at the beginning, but a life of addiction to wine and women corroded him from the marrow of his bones. Just by thinking that I'm the daughter of such a man, I start to feel sick, as if all of my blood is being corrupted…"

"That's not scientific. If there's just any part of a person that's corrupted while he or she is alive, that would be not the blood, but the mind."

Ikta finished speaking lightly, and the princess smiled at his refreshing humor.

"You haven't even met him, yet you say the same things…. No matter I express my thanks, I can't make you understand how much those words have lightened my heart…"

"Well, but that's not my accomplishment, it's that of science, see?"

"You didn't have to reject my thanks just then…. In any case, under the assumption that

the Cabinet of the Katjvarna Empire is severely rotten, I would like to request your assistance.”

At that point, Her Highness, Chamille, took a breath and started speaking after correcting her posture.

“Ikta Solork. –You, as a soldier, will ascend to the top of the Imperial Army.”

“…”

“I know that this isn’t something you want to do. However, I won’t allow you to say that you can’t. You have good instinct of military affairs- ‘’An overwhelming instinct’’ at that.”

The princess deliberately refrained from putting any more of her evaluation into words. Since the fact that she was currently alive and breathing here was due more to the extraordinary quality of Ikta’s abilities than anything.

He broke through the national border with his wits, led a captain on active duty by the nose through novel tactics, and foiled an attempted kidnapping by veteran soldiers by “reading” their higher dimensions of tactics. If a track record like this one didn’t promise future distinction, then just how should people measure someone’s ability?

“…That’s absurd. This example ignores the current state of affairs at this time, but hypothetically if I keep rising until I become General of the Army, what would I do after that? You’re not ordering me to stage a coup d’état against the Imperial Family, are you? In addition to soldier, nobleman, and hero, presenting me even with the honor of being ‘dictator,’ you’re really too generous.”

“No, we’re not staging a coup d’état. I dislike dictators, and even if that succeeded, the interior of the Empire will end up as a political grey area. There’s no way that the Kioka of present would let that prime opportunity pass.”

“In any case, it seems you are slightly aware of reality. Then, please tell me, what would you make me do once I’ve climbed the ladder?”

“’’I will have you lose a war.’’”

The princess’s immediate reply made Ikta stiffen for the first time. –This girl, what did she say just now?

“You will become a captain or General of the Army and command all of the forces of the Imperial Army, then having done that you will see to a decisive ‘’defeat’’ in the war with Kioka. Absolutely not a victory- this must be a defeat. Why, because even if you are victorious, the Empire is already so organizationally weak that it’s impossible for it to rebuild itself as a nation.”

That instant, Ikta felt as if lighting had come down into his head. Among the shocks he received since his time as an apprentice to Anarai Khan, this paradigm shift[6] that had a considerably dynamic effect in life.

“…Your Highness. Basically, with a lost war-“

“Yes, we will save this country with a lost war. To say it more precisely, by means of the losing battle, the Kioka Republic’s culture, economics, political philosophy- we will use

the external pressure of all I mentioned to purify the Empire.

You might be hearing an impossible idea. Certainly, there has yet to be a country that has done this knowingly. However, historically there have been several precedents where countries have flourished as a result of a lost war. Which is why I can say that is a plausible method."

Ikta couldn't do anything but stare in mute amazement. …Certainly, like that very incident with Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan had been, there were examples of small military defeats being used for political purposes in the Empire until now. But in the end, since those were limited to tactical and local defeats, ultimate victory was the hypothetical sacrificial pawn. In a manner of speaking, it was like abandoning your own rook in shogi and going for the enemy king.

However, Her Highness, the Princess's idea was different. That was an attempt at abandoning a victory on the surface of the board and trying to find a chance for victory off the board. Even in a normal war, strategy is in a higher dimension than tactics, and that structure approved of local defeats, but this princess, by placing politics in a higher dimension than strategy, was allowing even an ultimate defeat. She believed that the decisive defeat, which was an ''enormous sacrificial pawn'', would lead to victories in the distant future in regards to politics.

"…What do you plan to do about the Empire's native culture and nationality?! The treatment of the losing country is one of the things prescribed to the winning country, you know! When it comes to that, the Empire itself will become infinitely weak during its restoration!"

"Certainly that is true, but that is in the situation we should completely lose in war. If we meet defeat with plenty of reserve strength remaining, it would be possible to limit intervention from Kioka in the context of our military power. And Solork- what I want to request from you is exactly that."

"I-I can't win the war, and I can't lose the war without leaving enough strength for afterwards either? In other words, I-"

"''Lose skillfully'', Solork. For the sake of purifying the interior of the Empire, you will bring about a defeat that leaves a perfect amount of reserve strength so that the external pressure is increased moderately, and so that we can limit the interference from Kioka even after we lose.

You are the only one who can take on this role. It's not just a question about plain military ability- Ikta Solork, your spirituality, detested by soldiers, nobles, and royalty alike, is essential. For example even if Yatori has the same ability as you do, I can't entrust her with this role. She is a soldier by nature. Her genuine desire to shoot down the enemy and protect her country will never change. The very idea of using a lost war to benefit the country is sadly inconsistent with her way of life."

Ikta felt goosebumps rise throughout his body. –Uncommon. In this age, in this country, Her Highness, the Princess's idea was very uncommon. But in a way, it was adjacent to the Empire's corruption. Because, even the princess's plan to "save the country with a lost war" was in essence the same thing as the Empire's abnormal political inclination towards

“actions that compensate for the failures of the Cabinet with a lost war.”

“This body is no more than a figurehead princess who owns not even a piece of this territory. I currently don’t have the official authority to interfere with politics or the army. That is something I must have you obtain. The only thing I can do is lay the groundwork. Truthfully, we have no flexibility in terms of time. –Seeing as the reigning emperor, who continues his decadent lifestyle, is getting weaker by the day, we don’t know when he will succumb to illness. It likely won’t even be 10 years. Five years or six years, it might be much shorter than that…. If it comes to that, the parasites nesting in the Cabinet will support you Knights as candidates for Emperor, and it isn’t difficult to imagine that that they will incite a violent civil war. Since even that one thing is a difficult national crisis to overcome, Kioka might also take our political chaos as a good opportunity and come at us with a full-fledged attack. We will be attacked with a threat from the outside…Before that happens, you must rush to the top of the army.”

Be it five years or be it six years, Ikta would still be in his early twenties. There was no precedent of a captain of General of the Army that young in the Imperial Army. Rather, no one would object if someone were to pronounce it impossible.

In spite of that, the princess was telling him to do it. She firmly believed that it was possible for the youth before her eyes. Ikta grit his teeth. For him, creating this one-sided faith was a mistake he could never stop regretting.

“…Your Highness…you… where did you get that idea? In the Empire, no matter how twisted your mind is, it isn’t a motif that comes up. Say that there is ground that will nourish a reversal of that sort of thinking, that’s not in the Empire but in-“

She couldn’t possibly- this epiphany came down onto Ikta. The princess affirmed it with an immediate reply. “Yes. It’s something that’s hidden from the citizens, but I’ve lived on Kioka soil for the months and years from when I was three to when I was 11 years old. To guarantee the cease-fire conditions between both countries, I was given to them as a political hostage.”

“…! …That motif, it’s an amalgamation of Imperial and Kiokan styles?!”

Her Highness, Chamille brought her face close to Ikta’s, who was staring at her dumbfounded, so that their noses were almost touching. And, she filled her next words with the all of the determination that she accumulated in her not very long lifetime.

“Crush the long-cherished desire of soldiers underfoot, throw off your allegiance to the Imperial Family, betray every last bit of the trust you’ve received as a hero with that single defeat. –What do you say? There is no greater nor more fateful casting for you- who hates everything to do with soldiers, the Imperial Family, and heroes- than the one I am offering you!”

“……!”

“Be troubled no more, Ikta Solork, fight together with me until we lose! At any rate, can a twisted person like you ever go to the heaven spoken of by the Church of Alderah!? Then, let accompanying me to the depths of hell and leaving it be the same thing! I have already determined to be your partner on the road to Hades- I won’t start to complain now!”

This theatrical persuasion threw all logic to the wind, but Ikta gave no objection from his seat. The moment he couldn’t reject the princess’s plan as “worthless,” he’d probably already been caught by destiny.

Thus, the story began in the true sense of the word. “The skilled manager of the invincible status quo” Ikta Solork, and “the last princess of the Katjvarna Empire” Chamille Kitora Katjvanmaninik. These two lined up together and ran at full speed toward the next battle of their promised defeat.

Translator’s Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ a Japanese word chain game, in which the last syllable of one word is used as the first syllable of the next
2. Jump up↑ Kusu’s responses, seeing as they’re not especially significant, were changed to fit the pattern for the game. Their actual exchange is as follows: うるさがた(nitpicker) > たまご(egg) > 強情娘（ごうじょうむすめ）(Stubborn daughter) > めだか (killifish) > 過去（かこ）にこだわる(fixated on the past) > るり(laps lazuli) > 倫理的に狭量（りんりてきにじょうりょう）(ethically narrowminded) > うさぎ(rabbit) > 義理の娘といえなくも（ぎりのむすめといえなくも）(could even call her my step daughter) > もうふ(blanket) > ふ？
3. Jump up↑ written as: おあそび(game); read as:模擬戦(mock battle)
4. Jump up↑ written as: ヤトリ(Yatori); read as: あれ(that)
5. Jump up↑ science is written as 科学 and theology is written as 神学. The author calls them similar because the second character is the same, but that similarity doesn’t translate well into English.
6. Jump up↑ written as: 認識転換 (change in awareness); read as: パラダイムシフト(paradigm shift)

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 1 - Chapter Epilogue

Epilogue

Under a perfectly clear, cloudless night sky, a lone old man dressed in a white lab coat stood motionless.

The light he held in his hand was not a light spirit but an oil lamp. Currently, he was blocking even its weak light by holding out his hand. What he wanted to see was not at his feet where the lamp light could reach, but something which, while being in a complete opposite position, also required no light to observe.

“Wait a minute, Professor Anarai, if you’re outside at a time like this you’ll catch a cold!”

Suspicious of the condition of the old man, who wasn’t so much as shivering as he stood, a young man in a white lab coat came running out of a house. …Compared to the land of intense heat where they had lived previously, the night air here was a bit colder. Since his body hadn’t become accustomed to the climate, he was worried for Anarai’s health.

“Oh, Bajin. Calm down, I’ll return shortly.”

“…Ahh, were you observing the sky? It is quite clear today, isn’t it? So, which star do you have your sights on? Or is it the moon?”

“A star. One that definitely won’t disappear for another thousand years.”

From that strange phrasing, and the direction of Anarai’s gaze, Bajin quickly pinned it down.

“Alderamin[1] …right?”

“…Brrr! Hey, stop that, Bajin, simply call it the North Star. You’ll bring back memories of those abominable inquisitors from the Alderah Church.”

Saying that, Anarai finally returned back to the house. No matter how much time passes, he’s as moody as ever- thinking that, Bajin followed after him.

The new laboratory which the Kioka government gave them was no more than a single house, but for the two of them it was paradise on Earth where they could live without being intimate with mold or dust. Just with that, Bajin was ready to recognize his patriotism to Kioka, but Anarai was contrarily bold.

“Kah- those people in the government. They sent us a refusal!”

While rummaging on his desk through postal items recovered from the mailbox, Anarai suddenly growled. Inferring the situation, Bajin shrugged his shoulders and spoke.

“Is it the experiment from earlier? Well, no matter how large Kioka’s wallet may be, they won’t give us permission, you know.”

“What? Don’t you want to do it, Bajin?”

“…It’s hard to say. As a researcher I want to, but as a human being I don’t. At any rate, there will be opposition, you know, ‘’against spirit dissection’’.”

Anarai scoffed. –Yes, what this old professor had requested permission from the government for, was the dissection of the four great spirits. Of course he would use empty shells without “soul stones,” but even in the Kioka Republic, a country zealously founded on technology, permission wouldn’t be granted so easily.

“There’s nothing we can do about it. A state religion isn’t specified as it is in the Empire, but over 80% of even Kioka’s citizens are adherents to the Alderah Church. Even if the separation of church and state is more or less making progress, the commandments of the Alderah Church will nonetheless influence law.”

“What I want to say is much more fundamental. Why is it, that ‘human dissection’ is allowed if permission was received while the person was alive, but only ‘spirit dissection’ isn’t allowed? Unlike humans who die permanently, a spirit is immortal if you bring its ‘soul stone’ to the ‘Sanctum’, isn’t it?”

I understand your logic, but… Bajin’s face said everything with a wry smile. Anarai sank into silence, one might think because he were sulking, but suddenly he stood from his chair and moved to a corner of the room. What were lined up there, resembling the things from their previous laboratory, were life-sized models of the four great spirits.

“Hey, professor, stop putting it off and just tell me. What is the purpose of creating those ‘artificial spirits’?”

“I shan’t tell an unworthy disciple.”

“Ah- so cruel! If I, who has followed you so far, am an unworthy disciple, then you’ll never find a worthy disciple no matter where you search in the world!”

Bajin began sorting through scattered documents while voicing his anger. Catching glimpses of him from the corner of his eye, Anarai began talking in a quiet voice.

“Listen, Bajin. This is just a feeling, but don’t you think free will is characteristic to all living things?”

“-Huh? ‘Free will,’ you say?”

“Yes. Or not adhering to another’s will…shall I say? For example, wild animals once used to attack humans. In order to control that, we had to use traps and weapons to fight. Even when we lured them with a smile, they wouldn’t lower they guard that easily. That’s free will, right?”

“Huh…”

“However, when they became livestock and pets, things changed a bit. They became emotionally attached to humans and fawned over us. They would give us a front paw when we say ‘shake,’ and lay bare their genital organs when we say ‘beg.’ Of course livestock and pets are existences which have meaning in our lives, but that aside, they no longer have ‘free will,’ do they?”

“Since they are living things without free will, they are beneficial existences to humanity… is that it?”

“Yes. If ‘free will’ is the essence of living things, then I believe that ‘benefit to humanity’ is the essence of artificial things. And, when you observe them keeping that in mind…”

Anarai gazed at the models before his eyes one-by-one. The fire spirit which simply produced fire for us, the water spirit which always prepared clean water for us, the wind spirit which kept air pure, and the light spirit which became our light in the dark nights….

"…These existences which are so beneficial to humanity, humans' good partners without a fragment of free will, can we really call them living things?"

Taking those words in, Bajin finally understood Anarai's reason for creating "artificial spirits."

"Professor Anarai, basically…As means of proof that spirits are artificial lifeforms, you're reproducing spirits by your own hand?"

"I'm well aware that this is far from being absolute proof. Since being able to create them doesn't mean that I am able to create the same thing God purportedly created. …However, in that case, I'd be satisfied if only a fraction of people are able to cast doubt on it."

A human's efforts were able to reproduce them to this extent. One hundred years later, two hundred years later, it might come even closer to the original. One he thought of it that way, people who'd come to that idea would certainly arise. …Wait. If a human hand was able to reproduce them to this extent, then ''might not there be the possibility that humans created the original in the first place?''

"However, spirits are born at the 'Sanctum.' I hear that their mysterious institution existed even before it came be recorded in history. Isn't there no way that the humans of that era were able to create something that even Professor Anarai of the current era can't adequately reproduce?"

"It's exactly as you say. Therefore… I think that if there were humans who created them, then wouldn't they be a race of humanity without any direct connections to us? They might have ''failed to connect with us'', or even have ''wanted to deliberately cut ties''… whichever it is, I believe that the thing which they left to us as a single precious legacy-might it not be, basically, it the four great spirits?"

"That's magnificent. With your logic, that would mean that at a time that came far, far earlier than our civilization, people existed who possessed technology far more advanced than ours. Could we call it a super ancient civilization?"

"Hm, that naming isn't terrible. –Alright, it's settled then. Henceforth, we shall identify our various pursuits concerning the 'Manufacturers of the Four Great Spirits' by calling them our 'Discourse on the Super Ancient Civilization'!"

Perhaps because he was thrilled at having assigned a name to his hypothesis, Anarai had suddenly entered a good mood, and began taking the models into his hands. Bajin showed a wry smile and stared at the back of the old man's snowy head.

No matter which country or place they came to, he rushed on seeking truth without care for law, government, God, or time. Professor Anarai Khan's intellect was beloved by freedom. Quite possibly, from the perspective of another of the many geniuses, that might have been a very enviable thing.

<END>

Translator’s Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ written as: 主神星 (chief god star); read as: アルデラミン (Alderamin)

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Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 2 - Chapter Prologue

Prologue

That place was a little closer to the heavens than the earth, possibly closer to death.

The vegetation dotting the rock was sparse, the presence of animals was rare, and the blessing of life was hard to come by anywhere. Irrelevant to the abundance of water. This place was more prone to a lack of air.

“…Oof…! Hah…And, one…!”

The hoe which the man swung down stuck into the ground and churned the gravelly soil.

No matter how unkind the world is to them. If they have no other place to go, people would live there. They split open the wasteland, plow it, plant it, and live eating their meager harvest.

Together, of course, with the Hahashik[1]. Together with the one precious proof of the world’s love.

“Alright, good work! Now, take the Sorghum grains with you. We’re aiming for three sacks!”

“Hey, understood! Take it ‘n go!”

Stopping the hand holding his hoe, the man turned his head to the direction of the voice. His personal granary was over there. Several of his compatriots had opened the lock and entered, and were carrying out from inside the corn which he had harvested and ground into flour last year.

Three sacks. That, is not a trifling amount. Not at all. It was enough for a family of four to live on for four months.

“That would leave us with one meal a day until the next harvest. Is this really okay, Meraiz?”

His partner, a water spirit, whose body was fixed to the man’s back with a belt styled like the letter “X” and who had been scattering fertilizer on top of the dirt at the same time as the man had been plowing, asked this of his master.

“It’s fine, Eku. The children of the future will eat it. I’ll think of it like that, and I won’t feel hungry.”

“Before the future, the children of the present will starve. You have three of them in your household, Meraiz.”

“Then, I’ll make do with one meal every two days. That way, the children can eat two meals a day.”

With unshakable determination in his heart, the man answered. Confirming that this was an unmovable conclusion for his master, the spirit accepted it and nodded again, and the two of them silently continued their work.

“Hey, Meraiz, Dar Nanak’s comin’ today! Come by ‘n say hello, don’t hafta be much!”

At that voice, the hand plowing the dirt stopped. In the next moment, sticking his hoe by his feet, the man dashed across the fields. Starting to run after his compatriots who’d gone ahead of him, he overtook them and went even further.

At last, he could see it. His figure was there on the highest ground in the surrounding area, at a place which allowed him to command a view of the earth.

At first sight, he took a breath. She was accompanied at her rear by many warriors who were armed with air shooters and bow guns. The man was staring straight ahead of him far into the distance at the one to whom he would entrust his children’s futures.

“Long time no see, little girl.”

Facing the back of a small body, the man thus called out. Waiting one beat, the girl’s slightly hard voice came back.

“That form of address, cease with it already, Meraiz. …Yesterday night, the succession to the title of Dar was formally completed, wasn’t it? No more jokes from now on- I’ll have you treat me as the head of the family.”

It was a tone that deliberately eliminated familiarity. Sensing her, the man revised his attitude.

“…That was rude of me. Dar Nanak.”

“That is better.”

Nodding repeatedly, the girl didn’t face him again. From her firm demeanor, the man felt a sense of trust together with a touch of loneliness.

“Dar— so, how are the preparations for battle?”

“The soldiers are adequately disciplined. The preparation of the chosen site in the mountains is also 80% completed.”

“I see…”

“You peasants have shouldered the burden for it. To invite their carelessness, I didn’t allow you to work on the plains for a while, and I didn’t allow you even to go retrieve the abducted Hahashik. …Those who have lost their partners, those who have let their children starve, they are allowed to hate me.”

At the girl’s words, which emerged with a bitter smile, the man was silent and shook his head side to side. That was chief among all of her resolutions.

“—When’s it starting, the battle?”

“Very soon. Likely, before the next Spirit Festival.”

Sooner than expected, the day of destiny was drawing near. The man body’s shook suddenly and inquired.

“…Can we win, Dar Nanak? Against them…those, frightening changelings of the plains.”

Receiving his question, the girl reached out her hand to the endless scene sprawled out

below her as if she were yearning for something-

“…Say, Meraiz. Our current world[2], it’s only half.”

Like that, she tightly clenched her fist. With the determination to seize the future.

“That’s why I’m going, to take it back. The other half of the world[3] that was taken from us.”

The dearest wishes of the clan, the vow of certain victory, her actions spoke more eloquently of those than anything.

“—You understand, right? That is why we must be victorious!”

Over the ridges, through the trees, into the valleys- her voice echoed across to every corner of the mountains.

Translator’s Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ written as: 精霊(spirit); read as: ハハシク(Hahashik)
2. Jump up↑ written as: 山岳地帯 (mountain district); read as: せかい (world)
3. Jump up↑ written as: 地上 (earth); read as: せかい(world)

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 2 - Chapter 1

An Open Box and its Unfortunate Contents

30 kilometers south from Imperial Capital Banhataal, the Imperial Army Center Base.

Under the violent sunlight. Even today, the stationed soldiers were dripping with sweat from their training.

“Hurry with the hospitalization! When they fall back to the logistical support line, begin the stop-gap measures!”

The one giving commands to her subordinates at the top of her lungs, marked by her tall build and flowing light-blue hair, was Warrant Officer Haroma Bekkel.

She seemed slightly unreliable due to both her youth and lack of experience, but contrary to that impression, she was a prominent person of promise who held the title of “Imperial Knight.”

“You there, make your stitches smoother! You’re using too much ice! Half of one piece is enough for a bruise of that level! …Ah, over there, the position of your hands is too high for a cardiac massage! Press the heart at the protrusion of the sternum! Do you understand?! Try to push up from a lower point, like this!”

During relief practice which treated mannequins as injured soldiers, Haro was briskly going around and pointing out her subordinates’ mistakes.

As a water spirit holder and a graduate of a Nursing Academy, she commanded a Medics Platoon. They were mixed-gender like the other Divisions, but the ratio of female soldiers was slightly larger. The Medics themselves were deployed like any other unit, but her platoon, whose chief responsibility was running around the front lines providing relief, was one kind of search-and-rescue unit.

Their work could be compared to that of angels in two meanings. One meaning in that they are the saviors of injured persons who are unable to move. The other in that they are the ones who come to retrieve those who die in battle in their last moments.

“That’s enough! Groups which haven’t finished their treatments yet, please report your points of reflection to me! Other than that, form a line and return to the barracks!”

About half of the soldiers gathered in the open space left, and Haro received reports from the other half. The whole time, she had noticed a figure she recognized lingering in her peripheral vision… when the last group gave their thoughts and the need for restraint was gone, she walked over to him.

“Good afternoon, Ikta-san. Are you okay sleeping here?”

Haro called out in a warm voice to the youth lying down on the grass and reading a letter. Hearing that, Ikta raised his upper body and stretched like a cat.

“Yo, good afternoon, Haro. Worry not. Wherever I sleep, the right half of my bed is always reserved for you.”

It was his standard banter. Thinking it shameful to be teased all the time, Haro struck back today.

“…R-really? Haven’t your appointments been completely booked until a short while ago?”

“It depends on you whether I progress one step forward in making that kind of dream-like schedule into a reality. …Which day do you wish to reserve?”

Ikta’s eyes glinted suspiciously. Sensing that it was dangerous to go too far, Haro panicked and changed the topic.

“N-nevermind that, Ikta-san, where is your unit?”

File:Alderamin v02 bw.m.026.png

Ikta stuck out his tongue playfully.

“Unit? Ahh, them- if Suuya’s there, I can go around without a problem. And besides, I understand that it’s required, but I’m worse with this practice by repetition thing than I am with eating live centipedes.”

Ikta stuck out his tongue playfully. Haro smiled wryly at his excuse, but she was also relieved at the same time. –The laziness of this person, who didn’t resemble a soldier in the least, in middle of an overly strict military structure which prized discipline felt like an oasis to Haro.

“What’s that you are reading?”

When Haro asked innocently, Ikta returned the page to his face, and scoffed as if he were bored.

“—‘Anarai’s Box’ is open.”

“…? What kind of box is it?”

When Haro tilted her head, Ikta began explaining it lazily.

“In short, it’s a safe. Except what’s inside isn’t money or jewels but a fortune of knowledge. …Umm, have I told you that I studied under Professor Anarai Khan?”

“He’s the person who was taken as a refugee by Kioka, isn’t he? Science, was it? You said you learned it from that person…”

“Right, I am one of the ‘Apprentices of Anarai.’ There are many other apprentices in the world, and there are several rules which we share among us. One of those is that we put the research results cultivated by Anarai Khan and his apprentices into, well, ‘Anarai’s Box’—basically we make it into restricted knowledge.”

“So you’re secretive?”

“Not quite secretive- it’s more like we’re cautious. Making it restricted knowledge is a temporary measure, and afterwards, based on a discussion in light of various circumstances, we’ll even publish it. Well, it’s our style to not thoughtless discharge the research results. A single invention could turn the world upside down, you see.”

Ikta spoke without hesitation, and honestly, in Haro’s mind, an “invention which could

turn the world upside down” couldn’t exist. This kind of contradiction sometimes made her aware of the difference in upbringing between her and the youth.

“Except, speaking strictly about this time, it wasn’t that we took the plunge and opened it to the public after carefully looking at the circumstances- it was more like we were cornered and prodded from behind and compelled to have a discussion. …That old man, since he sought refuge in Kioka, it seems he was asked for several technological provisions which would be useful to military affairs. There are several technologies which he’d reluctantly disclosed. And, he reported that line-up to apprentices like me who have remained in the Empire.”

When he explained that far, Ikta shrugged with weary face.

“…Then as a result of our discussion, we are going to disclose several new technologies in the Empire as well in a way that restores the balance with Kioka. And it seems that I, who has for some reason enlisted in the army of all things, must become the messenger concerning these new technologies relevant to military affairs because of my position.”

Ikta’s attitude said that this wasn’t a big deal, but Haro didn’t quite understand the scale of what he was talking about.

As if he sensed her confusion, but Ikta scoffed and stood up-

“I rambled on about nothing. Well, just that the battle ground is evolving. It’s not worth rejoicing over or anything. Rather- I’ll just say it- I’d rather this kind of thing just crash and burn!”

Holding aloft the disheveled, crumpled letter, he threw it into the sky as hard as he could.

“Cease fire!”

With that command as a signal, the gunshots which had been sounding nonstop suddenly quieted away. The soldiers who had been arranged in one horizontal line quickly reformed their files, and turned presenting arms in the direction of their commander.

“Hm, well done. You guys are looking good.” The officer marked by his unruly brown hair and plump physical constitution, Warrant Officer Matthew Tetdrich, gave an honest evaluation. It wasn’t flattery. In truth, the speed and accuracy of the soldiers’ response to Torway’s command was beyond recognition compared to when he was first entrusted with a platoon.

“Next, a bayonet charge after two volleys. Change into your ranks for the line of battle, all hands ready your bayonets!”

The clanking sound of blades being fixed onto gun barrels overlapped and echoed. Without a moment’s delay the commander’s order came. Following two discharges of a gun, the straw posts which they were treating as enemy soldiers were dispersed and scattered.

“It’s coming along quite nicely, isn’t it? Your subordinates’ condition.”

Matthew expected agreement when he said that, but his colleague who would always say, “I guess so,” in a kind voice, for some reason, was making a stern face next to him and

glaring at the backs of the soldiers.

“…It’s no good, not like this. …With training of this kind, no matter how much time passes…”

On the other side of his bangs, Warrant Officer Torway Remeon’s green eyes shook with impatience. There was no joy or sense of accomplishment. Even though concerning the soldiers’ proficiency, it was he and not Matthew who was one lap ahead.

When he saw Torway act like that, Matthew began to feel embarrassed about himself. – What did he mean by well done? At this rate, he was face to face with the rival several steps ahead on himself, and he was lacking.

“…Ah, sorry, Maa-kun. Did you say something just now…?”

“…No, nothing.”

Cursing his own carelessness, Matthew tried to return his consciousness to his own soldiers. But then, the sound of horse hooves forcefully kicking the ground reached his ears, and the two soldiers unconsciously gazed in the same direction.

“…Yatori-san.”

Torway took a breath at the figure riding a horse as the vanguard of the cavalry group, the beautiful, awe-inspiring female figure which he knew by sight. The beauty of her fiery hair trailing in the headwind agitated their yearning and, along with impatience, amplified the youths’ desire to reach her level.

“Has she already entered cavalry training, that girl…. She’s skilled in horsemanship, but still that’s too fast. It’s supposed to be Imperial Army convention that the cavalry comes after you first perfect your command of infantry.”

While saying that, Matthew knew that he was making excuses. …Fortunately or not, among his friends, there were three people who were at a caliber high enough not restrained by convention. The troubled young man next to him was also one of them, but — even he was not at the same level as the fiery haired girl.

Twilight, when the hungry soldiers, finished with their training and classroom learning, were heading for the dining hall to eat dinner. While being protected on all sides by four bodyguards, a blonde girl with a high-class air about her walked down a dead silent hallway of the mathematics building.

“I shall eat dinner with the members of the ‘Order of Knights.’ Is that alright?”

“You don’t need take the trouble to go to a crowded dining hall- we’ll prepare your meal to your room…”

“A private room itself is too much special treatment. You mean to make them carry food to my room as well?”

“I’m afraid that before you became a soldier, you were one member of the Imperial Family, Your Highness.”

“That is trivial in this place. Even if the Imperial Family has the divine power to repel

bullets.”

“When you eventually receive the Emperor’s crown, the entire nation will prostrate themselves before you, Your Highness. Isn’t that more like a divine power?”

At this reserved conversation, the youngest warrant officer in army history at 12 years, the Third Princess of the Katjvarna Imperial Family, Chamille Kitra Katjvanmanninik, heaved a sigh.

Those protecting her were newly selected bodyguard soldiers in light of the kidnapping incident earlier. How these faithful and trustworthy people tried to establish Her Highness, Chamille “as royalty” everywhere was vexing for the person herself. If they made her act as royalty to the extreme, then her public reason for entering the army would— it would adversely affect the Imperial Family’s plans to improve its image, but they didn’t seem to have the flexibility to think that far.

“You’re misunderstanding- what makes people prostrate themselves is political power. Many people are mistaken about the nature of it. That power being called the power to communicate with god, God himself certainly has reservations about that…, no?”

Noticing a figure in her periphery vision, Her Highness, Chamille, unthinkingly slowed her walking pace. She cleared her throat for the benefit of her bodyguards, who had decelerated with the same timing as to not break their four-sided formation, and spoke.

“…I will follow shortly. Go to the dining hall before me. You may dine as well.”

“Huh? No, we cannot-”

“Did you not hear me? That just now was an order from me as the Princess.”

Addressed with that one phrase, even those bodyguards had no choice but to comply. Watching them as they reluctantly departed until they were completely gone, Her Highness, Chamille, turned on her heel and entered the classroom which she had just passed by.

“What are you doing in a place like this, Solork?”

In an obscure corner of the classroom, the youth she knew on sight was expressionlessly running a pen on paper. He didn’t send a single glance toward the princess, but even that was typical. After a slight pause, a displeased voice spilled out.

“I’m drawing a blueprint. You can tell that much by looking, can’t you?”

“In this dim room? You ruin your eyes. You should have asked Kusu for a Lantern.”

“Well I am straining myself. But if I turned on a light at this hour, I’d stand out, wouldn’t I?”

Does he not want the contents seen by other people? Drawn by curiosity, the princess peeked at the blueprint, but she couldn’t make sense of what was being sketched by just looking at it once. It seemed like some sort of long and narrow internal part?

“Hey, please don’t lean your body over. You’ll block my light- it’s pitiful enough as it is.”

Ikta was blunt. The princess huffily rested her body on the opposite desk and glared at him.

“You’re misunderstanding. I came to rebuke you.”

“Then I’ll speak. –How long do you plan on contenting yourself with the rank of warrant officer?”

The youth didn’t move a single eyebrow. She took his silence as a good opportunity to interrogate him.

“Over half a year has passed already since your conferring of decorations. My remaining time is steadily decreasing. Do you think you’ll make it in time like this?”

“…Now see here, princess. High Grade Military Officer Cadets usually advance and become second lieutenants simultaneously with their respective classes four years after their enlistment. Climbing the ranks comes after that. It’s something even a child would understand.”

“Can you take those kinds of ordinary steps and still become a captain or field marshal within five or so years? Your destiny dictates that you must make strides impossible for ordinary humans, over and over again.”

“Captain or field marshal, huh…. You’re asking rather directly, but can you imagine me five years from now standing side by side with Yatori and Torway’s fathers? You can’t, right? If you can, then that’s proof that a too-powerful imagination, princess. Please leave the army at once and become a writer of fairy tales.”

“Bada Sankrei stood side by side with those two. I think that it’s completely natural for his son to succeed him.”

Ikta sighed deeply at her response,. The princess would forever believe that the late great commander’s talents were now completely in Ikta’s hands. Foolish and immature blind faith.

However, the one who had created that blind faith was none other than Ikta himself. Disgusted by fate’s sense of humor, the youth decided to search outside common sense for material for his argument.

“That’s the gist of it. Though even if I try to climb the ranks, if there are no opportunities to carry out great services, then it can’t be helped, can it?”

“Hm.”

“Soldiers accomplish meritorious deeds in battle before they advance. If you want war, the one in the Eastern Province just ended. We don’t know when the next conflict will occur, first of all, and it’s obviously better if it didn’t occur at all. War is sometimes the price for failed diplomacy, after all.”

The princess had fallen into silence, and Ikta knew that his argument had worked. …No, she wasn’t planning on asking me seriously in the first place, he realized. However, she was also impatient. Even if he delayed climbing the ranks, it’s impossible if the person himself doesn’t have the minimum accomplishments.

“Hah… Advancement or meritorious deeds or whatever. These things you’re thinking are quite cynical, each and every single one of them.”

The girl, who was 12 years old at best, was not worried. Children ought to have worries

suitable for children— believing so, Ikta forcibly shifted the conversation in a vulgar direction.

“—By the way, princess, since we have established that I have a mother complex, I don’t really want to be thought of as a loli-con by others on top of that.”

“…Huh?”

“I’m talking about appearances, see? It’s fine to develop a connection with the members of the ‘Order of Knights,’ princess, but you’ll be coming to see me privately just like you are right now, no? Sometimes you’ll even shake off your bodyguard soldiers. How do you think that will be interpreted from an outsider’s perspective?”

Her Highness, the Princess, was flabbergasted at first, but as her understanding deepened, her face slowly turned red. Now this way of not realizing these kinds of things is what you call child-like- Ikta sadistically shrugged his shoulders.

“…W-we’re going to be thought of like that!?”

“I’m saying that there are suspecting people everywhere. No, well, rather there’s a way of using this as an excuse. If you think shamelessly, if we’re lovers, then it’s not a suspicious relationship if we meet often. On the other hand, that relationship itself could be viewed as a problem, couldn’t it?”

Ikta’s remark did nothing to smooth the situation over, and Her Highness, the Princess’s face became increasingly red. Perhaps she became embarrassed to look him in the face during that time, but she turned away in a panicked manner appropriate for her age.

“I-I will be careful from now on…! I’m leaving now!”

“Yep yep. The best of dreams tonight, princess.”

He watched her leave half running out of the corner of his eye then returned his consciousness to the blueprint, but the sun had sunk too far while they were talking. Already, he could only faintly see the letters and diagrams he had drawn. He strained his eyes for a while, then released his pen.

“…I guess I’ll stop here for today. I’m hungry, let’s go to the dining hall, Kusu.”

“Yes, Ikta. If you are going to dine, then please take a larger portion of leafy vegetables today.”

Stuffing the rolled-up blueprints in his breast pocket, he stood from his seat and left the classroom. While relying his partner’s Lantern, he walked down the dark hallway at his leisure.

That day’s ballistics lecture was not pleasant for Yatorishino Igsem.

“…I hear she killed 30 people in under 30 seconds…”

“And that half of the corpses had no heads, and there was not one which was left whole…”

“As expected of Igsem- I can’t believe she’s human.” “Idiot, if she hears you she’ll make your head go flying too!”

It was because these rumors had been being exchanged in her vicinity since the start of the lesson.

It can't be helped that they're gossiping with half-truths, but can't they at least talk so I can't hear them?- Yatori thought this fiercely. The story that she had slayed the members of the bodyguards led by Captain Ison Bou one after the other at the time of the aforementioned attempted kidnapping incident involving Her Highness, the Princess, had spread within the army as an exaggerated anecdote.

Already two months had passed since the incident, and it was losing its novelty as gossip, but… when she sat down with a crowd with which she shared no familiarity in a classroom lecture like this, the excitement of those days was suddenly resurrected. In any country in any time or place, soldiers are partial to a vivid epic.

"..But wait. If she's that strong, wouldn't she have been better off not turning it into a massacre?"

"Well, if she'd let one guy live, she coulda probably figured out who the leader is."

"That's ridiculous. You can't work somethin' like that out by increasing the kill count."

She also heard some words close to slander mixed in with their simple-minded praise. Even if she couldn't be happy like this, Yatori didn't have the will to object to her "massacre" being overkill.

—Increasing the kill count, huh.

Yatori had no taste for masochism, but she meekly accepted that criticism. During that time, she did nothing but completely cut down any enemies who entered her vision. My sword, in essence myself. There was no trying to deny this reality.

"When too many generations are piled on a soldier's lineage, that might be what comes of it, no? In short, the Igsems- ahh, ow!?"

A small stone that came flying out of nowhere struck the back of the person's head who was amusing himself with the most boisterous chattering. When he held his head and cowered, the same things came flying at his cohorts around him.

"Oww!" "Agh! What's this, a rock!?" "Who the hell did it!?"

Screams and angry roars came one after another, and the instructor, hearing the ruckus, turned away from the chalkboard.

"SILEENCE! You there, what are you doing?! I'm talking to you, Ikta Solork!"

The time it took for the instructor to identify the source of the ruckus was close to zero, as if he had fixed his sights on the problem child who was always causing trouble. The youth who was called by his full name stood up holding a palm-sized catapult he had made by combining wood and string.

"Please excuse me. I thought that I would explain the current state of the army's battery like this so it'd be easier to understand."

Ikta declared it shamelessly. The instructor walked to him and wordlessly struck his cheek.

"Ahh…What, was that unnecessary?"

“I am lecturing right now! Be quiet and learn ballistics!”

“Huhh, I was trying to make a demonstration with deep relevance to the current state of the battery. So that was unnecessary of me? Really? Are you sure?”

As Ikta faced him tenaciously with a stranger and stranger tone, the instructor showed a scowl implicit of anger. But, perhaps because it reminded him of something from his experiences up to this point, Ikta drew one step closer with an equally severe expression.

“…Speak. If it’s not worthwhile, I’ll have everyone run 20 laps around the base.”

Regarding the enforced totalitarian military, collective punishment was the most basic of basics. The other soldiers sent him looks that said, “this is not a joke,” but Ikta nevertheless nodded with composure. As though if he had to run because of something like that, he wouldn’t be afraid.

“—Since I have received your permission, I will not hesitate.

Well then, the air mortar cannon is one of the main weapons of the Imperial Army of the present. It’s constructed to use the pressurized air of four~six wind spirits to fire iron balls- a weapon like a giant air shooter, so to speak- but its handling often seems to be a problem for soldiers fighting on-site.

Now the causes. First, it’s heavy. Even the smallest size requires one horse or three soldiers to carry. Second, its power is weak relative to its weight. It seems that its bullets are often bounced off stone fortresses. And third, it has a short range. Its greatest range is about 500 meters, but its effective range is 200 meters at best. In addition, if the terrain is unfavorable, then hiding the body is also difficult, and the enemy will come attacking before you can fire a second bullet. Soldiers can’t run away when their shouldering a heavy cannon, and there are frequently cases reported of difficult situations where soldiers abandon it after firing only one shot.”

He spoke fluently as if he’d read a script repeatedly. Taking no notice of the pressure of the collective punishment, Ikta held up his miniature handmade catapult and casually continued his explanation.

“So, as to what the soldiers who’d lost the air mortar cannon did afterwards, they turned the materials on-site into supplies and made this. As you can see, it is a catapult. Even though it is a primitive weapon that has been in use since over 1,000 years ago, it is surprising still on active duty. We cannot make light of it. Its power and range falls short of those of the air mortar cannon, but its strength lies in its ability to fire various things besides iron balls. Throwing flaming straw and starting a fire, throwing the remains of a horse killed by disease and spreading a plague, and so on. With this strength, the practicality to create on site, it has even given rise to the revivalist opinion among soldiers that we should retire the air mortar cannon and make the catapult their official arms.”

He made an exaggerated gesture of shrugging his shoulders. His audience had unconsciously leaned in to hear him speak. Even unconsciously, Ikta Solork was able to put on this show that made people listen attentively.

“Well, even if that is an extreme argument, it is the reality that the air mortar cannon is lacking in efficiency. Then, how should we improve it? We could consider a plan to make

it more light weight, but if we ignore the practical problem, then that is misguided, right? If we make it easier to carry as mentioned, then rather than a cannon it's a large caliber air shooter. The concepts of their designs would be fundamentally confused. What's desired in a cannon is first, all the great power it has to compensate for the demerit of its weight. That is, the overwhelming destructive power to smash the enemy's fortress and to destroy their trenches. The second is its range, but that comes naturally once you have power.

And so, the soldiers with the strongest offensive power on-site are the cavalry. Let's say that even two times as many air gunner soldiers were present, they can't stop a coordinated attack by the cavalry troops. Even now, when the personal combat strategy as fellow knights has become a relic of the past, a branch of the army that we can say is strong against the cavalry as a matter of fact doesn't exist.

However, it is possible to imagine one. The cavalry's offensive power is something brought forth by their orderly ranks and files. In that case, we just need to cause an impact that demolishes that. …Have you caught on yet? —Right, we want the power of a cannon to be sufficient for this. A battery with greater power can be an advantageous existence against the cavalry. As a result of the, the hierarchy of army branches which places the cavalry on top will likely collapse and be reorganized power relations resembling rock-paper-scissors that read cavalry → infantry, infantry → battery, battery →cavalry. The infantry is strong against the battery because it is light of foot and moreover because its ranks and files during a charge have flexibility."

When Ikta hinted at something and stopped his explanation, the instructor agitatedly asked a question about an aspect he suddenly recalled.

"…Ikta Solork. Basically, it's that. The 'bomb cannon' which has begun to be used in the Republic Army, you're say we should employ it in the Imperial Army as well?"

"It could have that interpretation. I'll leave everything to the audience."

The instructor bent his mouth into a "へ" shape. –Though the admiration of enemy technology was an implicit taboo, this blatantly guided the audience's awareness, and "I'll leave everything to the audience" was cleverly said.

But, the instructor couldn't reject his point as "not worthwhile." Doing that would be deceiving himself. Because as a soldier on active-duty, as a teacher of ballistics, if he said that he had never felt the efficiency of the air mortar cannon to be definitely lacking, that would be a lie.

"…That was very interesting. Alright, I'll pardon everyone 20 laps around the base."

Remembering what was gambled on Ikta's speech, the soldiers openly showed relieved faces. But, the smug expression as though that was the natural outcome of the person himself crumbled away with the next line.

"And now the punishment for interrupting my lecture. Go and run 40 laps around the base by yourself, Ikta Solork."

"…Haah!?"

A strange sound escaped from his stiffened throat. Ikta timidly peeked at the instructor's face, but when he confirmed that there was not one bit of humor in it, he quickly resigned

himself and ran out of the classroom.

“…Ahhh. He really likes to stir up trouble for himself, that guy.”

A mutter mixed with inappropriate laughter. But, in the next moment, Yatori stood from her seat without hesitation.

“—Instructor. May I also run outside and come back?”

“What reason do you have, Warrant Officer Yatorishino Igsem?”

“Let’s see. Just now, I interrupted your lecture for something insignificant. As punishment for that.”

When Yatori declared it clearly, the instructor’s lips unnaturally tightened. Was it Yatori’s imagination, or did it appear more like a suppression of a wry smile than an expression of anger?

“Go. But, don’t let Ikta Solork skip even a single lap.”

“Yes sir!”

Giving an awe-inspiring salute, the fiery-haired girl raced from the classroom like a streak of wind.

“Ahh, the time for the official tour of the Northern Province is finally here…. Things are going to get boring from now on, seriously.”

Noon of the next day. Seeing the message posted on the bulletin board of the barracks, Matthew sighed.

“The post is at the Soumin River Garrison…in the sticks[1] at the base of the great mountain range. It’s a place with nothing else besides the base, farms, mountains, and one small town. It’s the northernmost edge of Katjvarna. And yet since the bumpkins of Shinaak Tribe are so aimless there’s no public order.”

“It also sounds like there several opposition parties after the military stores. However, conversely we’re also using that the environment as a training ground for acquire actual battle experience, so I can’t say if the Imperial Army is being stubborn, or something else.”

Torway smiled wryly. At the same time, hands were placed on their shoulders which they had aligned as they stood.

“—I can hear you. Who is the hell is the one making fun of the Northern Province?”

“Eh, Ik-kun?”

“What’s your problem? -you picked a weird thing to take issue with. Where we’re headed is the countryside, isn’t it?”

Ikta tsked his tongue at Matthew, who shook off the hand placed on his shoulder and objected.

“I don’t get it. I mean, I like the city too, but saying something like the countryside = unglamorous is rather prejudiced. In particular, Matthew, you just made fun the Shinaak

Tribe by calling them bumpkins. I doubt that. That's proof that you don't understand their magnificence."

"Huh. Ik-kun, are you knowledgeable about the Shinaak Tribe?"

"Somewhat. When I was personally studying under that old man Anarai, I had the experience of going on a field study of the Shinaak Tribe's cultural sphere. My aim was to investigate the geologic structure and climate of the alpines, but for me it was more enjoyable to interact with the native people. It's a good memory."

"Hmph, aren't they barbarian mountain dwellers? What was so enjoyable about that?"

"They had several charms, but—if I had to pick one, the women were energetic and beautiful."

Ikta spoke with a serious face. Matthew wearily shook his head.

"Aren't you partial to older women? Our standards are too different so it's not a good reference."

"I won't deny that, but the beauty of Shinaak women isn't limited just to their exteriors. They have an extremely matrilineal society there, and the women are the ones who take leadership on everything. That gives rise to a peculiar custom. As an example of their extremeness… I think it was a year ago…"

After Ikta intelligibly whispered into their ears, Torway slightly blushed, and Matthew, his face twitching, leapt back.

"Th-that's shameless! A woman did that to a man…!?"

"The world's a big place, Matthew. The criteria for a shameless act changes with the location, see?"

Matthew was flustered, Torway was red-faced and silent, Ikta was teasing them. In the direction of these three people, each in his own way causing a racket, by chance came walking Her Highness, the Princess, and the remaining members of the "Order of Knights."

"You all seem in a good mood. What are you making a fuss about in a place like this?"

"It'd have been better if Your Highness hadn't asked. With these circumstances, in eight or nine cases out of 10, it's about something dirty."

Shooting them cold glares, she hit on a fine point. At that, the innocent Torway became abashed and hung his head in embarrassment, but Matthew denied it as though it were unthinkable.

"I-I wasn't talking about anything to be guilty about! Ikta just started…"

"Dirty things? Oh you mean one like that. Haro's sweat-soaked shirt clinging tightly to the skin, and those round masses of Haro's which I recognize with one glance, or some romance filled story like that?"

"Eh….Ahhh!?"

Haro noticed her own state and panicked, running for cover to fix her attire. Yatori, seeing

her off, kicked the offender’s shin as hard as she could as minimal vengeance.

“…Hss!”

He didn’t scream. Only a dull sound echoed, Ikta crouched there with a cold sweat breaking from his forehead. Everything below his shin was gone— for a moment he truly thought that.

“Please reflect on your actions. Someone who takes that attitude in the presence of women is the worst kind of scumbag.”

Saying that then sending a backward glance to Ikta, who was unable to object due to the intense pain, she directed her gaze to the bulletin board.

“…Ahh, assignment to an official tour of the Northern Province. It’s that time of year again, isn’t it?”

“Besides dealing with the opposition parties and observing the mountain people, I hear it’s a generally leisurely post. Half a year there. Yatori, you don’t think that this a tedious custom?”

“No, I wouldn’t have it any other way. Though it’s on a small scale, I want acquire even a small amount of actual battle experience now.”

At the promising reply, the princess didn’t hide the affection showing in her expression. … But on the other hand, the moment her gaze returned to Ikta, who had yet to recover from the pain in his leg, she huffed a sigh of disappointment

“…Though I would like to see this kind of ambition from a certain someone else, too.”

Translator’s Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ the middle of nowhere, surrounded by farming land

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After moving toward the northern boundaries, the humidity that always lingered around disappeared, the huge plants covering the dry soil were also replaced by grasslands, further north they arrived at a gravel area with very few water sources spread in the wilderness, this was an area harsh even for the most prepared traveler.

The soldiers, during this long-drawn carriage travel, could only gaze at the ever-changing terrain. At the very least they reached the so called “Place with no reclamation value” and consequentially abandoned as borders.

From the last village, which was also the closest about 10 KM away from their current position, they are welcomed to the Empire’s most northern outpost.

After all personnel were accommodated into the base, the welcome speech to the neatly-lined soldiers begun.

“High Grade Military Officer Cadets as well as the training soldiers, I welcome your arrival this year as well. I feel extremely joyous for your presence at the Northern stronghold!”

The interlocutor was the supreme commander of the Northern stronghold, Lieutenant General Tamshiikushik Safida.

“Then, moving to a gloomier topic… surely everyone present knows of the collapse of the eastern region. As a fellow protector of one-fifth of the Empire’s land, I feel deep regrets. The moment the savages of Kioka ravaged our lands, if I had lead a group of soldiers to the Eastern stronghold, then it wouldn’t have ended with such results… Even now, my chest still fills up with remorse when I think about this.”

After hearing such words, not only Ikta but many felt disagreement… Even without knowing how many people his ‘a group of soldiers’ referred to, but given the scenario that even Lieutenant General Rikan, who was present there and risking his own life couldn’t do a thing, in which way would Lieutenant General Safida have overturned the situation? Furthermore, in his speech, not once has he given commemoration to the fallen officers.

“In order to avoid such re-occurrence, we have to train exhaustively every day and wholeheartedly mold an indomitable strength, technique and mindset. Because the day for the battle of revenge will come, and whether we are able to counterattack Kioka, all will depend on our soldiers’ loyalty and patriotism.”

After that, the rubbish motivational opening, which was something that would enter from one ear end exit throughout the other, continued for 20 minutes. The speaker was

completely unaware of the growing boredom and the increasing annoyance among the soldiers.

“…based on the aforementioned, I hope that you, whom will be shouldering the future of the army, your patriotism shall be strong and pure! — Although brief, that was my speech.”

After the ending words, Ikta, standing at the front of the third illumination battalion, shrugged disapprovingly–Brief, huh? Where was it brief? Since it was just statement devoid of any content you should at least have the decency to end it early.

Lieutenant General Safida, while walking down and enjoying the feeling of finishing the speech, was replaced by a tall and slim looking man who is now standing on the podium.

Maybe he was feeling unwell? His complexion looked bad.

“…I’m the aide of the supreme commander… cough, cough… Major Yuskushiram Taekk. Cough…cough, cough… Sorry. Then I will herein state everyone’s treatment.”

Completely opposite to the empty speech given by the commander, Major Taekk exclusively instructed on practical and complete instruction. Such were information regarding which local troop the training troops will be incorporated, how the command system will become, where will be the living quarters of the soldiers, where is the dining room, etc.

“…That’s it, if…cough, cough… there’s anything you don’t understand, you can ask me questions now.”

After determining there were no more questions and ascertaining no one raised hands, Major Taekk made a salute to all present and left the podium while coughing.

While he obliviously wasn’t that old, yet his slightly curved back is giving a feeling of sadness comparable to that of an old cad.

Only now Ikta murmured something everyone present was thinking.

“… You can discern the job distribution at a glance, that man must be under a lot of psychological pressure”

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A notification requesting everyone’s presence at the welcome party immediately came when they were finally taking a breath after being led to their rooms and depositing their luggage.

Since the time is now noon and this is a military facility on the border, even if it is called a welcome party, it is mainly just a plain gathering, even the location is just the big room used for conferences.

Based on the contents, Ikta and Yatori’s Imperial Segal High Grade Academy’s graduation

meal was much more prosperous, but that situation was a given, and the only person who could complain about the absence of liquors would be Ikta.

“To the prosperity of the rule of his majesty and the lands protected by us soldiers– Cheers!”

Following the lead of Lieutenant General Safida, the military officers raised their cups filled with grape juice.

Next came the time of socializing, which to the High Grade Military Officer Cadets was a moment where they must accept the greetings of all senior officers.

Of course the interest of these people wouldn’t have left alone the members of the legendary ‘Order of Knights’.

“Are you the five who were bestowed knighthood together, the much anticipated newbies?”

“Heard you guys passed the Kioka border with her Highness the Princess? That luck is worth a toast, let’s drink!”

“Did you meet Kioka soldiers? I heard they run like beasts and eat raw meat, is it true?”

Facing the five who obtained knighthood in such special case, the attitude of senior officers was displayed in a wide range. There were those who closed in by pure curiosity; also people leaking jealousy every time they spoke; and of course people who tried to get close to them thinking ahead of the time.

There were especially many people asking a description of their fight with Kioka soldiers. The reason was because most of the soldiers living in the far north had no experience in engaging battle with Kioka.

Yatori and Torway’s displayed the ability to cope with the situation, however Matthew and Haru’s puzzled look were also at the center of the spotlight. Incidentally, Her Highness Chamille, with a not so amused look while sitting at the seat of honor, was having a conversation with Lieutenant General Safida who was sitting next to her.

Since she didn’t want to intrude in the military formalities, she especially made use of her royal position to get out of the scene.

Well, talking about the only one who was left, he was already hiding around the corners of the room trying to avoid being at the center of discussion.

He had very little interest in military socializing to begin with, furthermore the only few female officials were already swarming around Torway, which made this case’s boringness rare even for Ikta’s standards.

However, when he was just about to sweep through all the food by munching silently, an officer left the group and walked towards Ikta. It was a young man with an uncleanly shaven beard and mustache. In his pouch one could see the same kind of light spirit as Ikta’s Kusu.

“–Hey, are you having fun?”

The man affectionately spoke to Ikta and readily pulled a chair to sit next to him.

“Yes, thanks to you.”

“There’s no need to be so sarcastic…Anyway you too are a light spirit user huh?”

The man’s gaze landed at Ikta’s waist.

Ikta originally wanted to drive him away by being cynical, but after seeing no such reaction from his counterpart, he corrected his attitude slightly and started a self-introduction.

“…I’m the Platoon Leader of the third illumination battalion, Warrant Officer Ikta Sorlok. This is my partner Kusu.”

“I belong to the first regiment of the Northern Region, the commander of the ninth illumination company, Lieutenant Senpa Sazaruf and this is my partner Chi, pleased to meet you”

After the greetings of their respective masters the spirits in their pouch also did the same action. Past the official introductions, a bold yet pleasant smile surfaced on Lieutenant Sazaruf’s face.

“I’ve heard before that in the legendary ‘Order of Knights’ there was a troublesome guy, as I thought it was you, right?”

“Since being there would expose my unfitness, I’m keeping my distances.”

“Hm, yeah you certainly don’t look like a Knight, that handsome guy there sure looks a lot more into the role.”

The words inadvertently spoken by Lieutenant Sazaruf cruelly stabbed in Ikta’s chest.

“Haha–hahaha, hey you really are straightforward. Hahahaha…. Haha.”

Ikta, who originally attempted to overcome the situation with an impactful laughter failed, is now frozen in place with a half smiling face…

“…UuuUuuuUuArghHhhhHh…!!”

In the end, he held his head with both hands, lowered his stance and let out a beast-like sound.

“Whoa! Wait… you’re crying just for that…? Are these the legendary Manly Tears?”

“Damnit…! Those Ikemen who can attract women even without saying a word…such odious creatures!”

“Hey Hey Hey, you really just spoke whatever passed through your head! Your collapse as a human being is way too sudden!”

One could feel the commotion even from afar, and while Lieutenant Sazaruf was being overwhelmed by the situation, Her Highness Chamille, already feeling exhausted by the conversation with Lieutenant General, walked towards them with a disapproving expression.

“…I only took my eyes away from you for a moment… Sorlok, the banquet has just started, what are you feeling dissatisfied for?”

Instead of Ikta who was being interpolated by the Princess, it was Lieutenant Sazaruf who overreacted.

Seeing how he was standing straight while doing a formal salute, the Princess shook her head with a difficult expression.

“You can relax… No, please relax Lieutenant. As stated by the military ranks, you are actually my superior.”

“Ah, no… that would be outrageous…!”

“It seems Sorlok immediately brought you troubles. Not only he has a bad personality, his character is also an issue, but if you look deep enough there are still good parts. So, thank you for your care in the future… uhm…”

“This one belong to the first regiment of the Northern Region, Commander of the ninth illumination company, Lieutenant Senpa Sazaruf!”

Their statements made it very awkward and he was not certain of which side was better. The so-called Royals are truly an existence that creates confusion in a vertical structure– Ikta thought so, but at that right moment a loud voice reverberated.

“Hahaha! My long awaited day has finally come! Daughter of Igsem!”

With a voice loud enough to make everybody turn their head, the owner of it proudly stood at the center of the room; Yatori who was laughing with senior officers faced him with a positive attitude.

The man was full of muscles, whether you looked at it vertically or horizontally, and had a lion like mane of hard red hair.

In addition to the two wooden swords in his hands, there was another strapped at his waist totaling three.

“What may I do for you?”

At Yatori’s earnest replay, the strongman forcefully stepped on the floor.

“I will say this only once so listen well! My affiliation is with the first regiment of the Northern Region, I serve as the Platoon Leader of twenty-second cuirassier battalion, Deinkun Hargunska! The age is 26, rank is Warrant Officer! My reliable partner is the water spirit Niki!”

“I also shall present myself then, I’m the Platoon leader of the first training platoon of incineration division, Warrant Officer Yatorishino Igsem, my partner is Shia. Please take care of me, Warrant Officer Hargunska.”

“I was aware of your name, and now I will remember your affiliation and rank! Okay, let’s leave the rest to our sword!”

Hargunska threw the swords in his hands and Yatori received them. The other party carefully prepared a set of military saber and a short gauche. She moved her sight line upward to the seat of Lieutenant General Safida.

“I have received a duel request. Lieutenant General Safida, may we borrow some fighting space?”

“Major, your heard her, what now?”

“Yes… cough, cough… the girl is the current generation of Igsem? Then, since outside is getting dark, feel free to fight here. We just need to set an area and the rules as we can’t let you break furniture. Cough…”

The Major feebly finished speaking, the Lieutenant General then fumblingly nodded, announcing to both:

“Good, you two may proceed, everyone else help moving the tableware… also it’s worth mentioning that in the whole Northern Garrison there’s no one who can match Hargunska’s sword skills. Against such fierce opponent, you can fully display the renowned reputation of the best two handed techniques of the Igsem family.”

Hearing that, Yatori instead left the short wooden gauche threw by her opponent in Haro’s custody.

Seeing this made Warrant Officer Hargunska very angry.

“Oi! What is the meaning of this?”

“Please don’t worry, I think facing an opponent wielding only one sword with two is unfair.”

Hearing those underestimating like lines made a vein pop on Hargunska’s solar plexus. He drew the large sword at his waist and held it in a frontal stance. His audacity made him look like a solid tower.

“You mean you are not taking me seriously! I sure am being underestimated!”

“Igsem’s two sword style was developed for the sake of facing many foes at once, if the opponent is a lone person, one sword is enough.”

Yatori’s casual replay made the calm officers get excited too. Without anyone saying so, the spectator moved to form a circle around the two resulting in the formation of a dueling space. The sudden tension made the majority of the people happy, but there were also a few among them with a cheeky unpleased look.

“…Such a vulgar practice, Yatori’s skills are not a showpiece for people to enjoy.”

Her Highness Chamille spoke with an unhappy face.

Hearing the Royalty’s thoughts, Lieutenant Sazaruf immediately intended to intrude the duel and stop it, but before he could, someone bluntly interrupted him:

“Your idea is wrong, Igsem’s sword skill is indeed a showpiece, princess.”

“… What did you say?” The princess stared Ikta with sharp eyes.

The young man disregarded the look Lieutenant Sazaruf sent as if saying “Have you gone mad? Who do you think you are replying to?” and continued:

“Seeing how smoothly the whole process went, I would say that nine out of ten this is a scheduled arrangement. Yatori should also have noticed it, this is common practice, it happens wherever a member of the Igsem family goes.”

“You mean even the supreme commander Safida want to watch such commotion? I really

can’t understand people. Such abrupt and selfish actions clearly are ruining the order which is the basics of the military.”

Ikta gave a fleeting glance at the disagreeing princess and then moved his hand to his chin.

“… Why do you think Yatori is allowed to wield two swords?”

“If you are asking why… isn’t it because she is really strong?”

“It is not so. As princess has said it before, it is essential to maintain order in the military. Following this principle, not only soldiers but also officer should be given a standardized set of equipment, this is not something that can be changed on a personal basis. So the two wielding Yatori would be an impossible figure if you were following the normal rules.”

Seeing Ikta gushing out that speech made Lieutenant Sazaruf widen his eyes in surprise.

Since it seemed the tables have been moved, the dueling field prepared and the crowd parted to have a better look, the youth said to the princess as a prelude: “This will be a little long”

“Hundreds of years ago, when Katjvarna Empire was still in chaos, there were warlords everywhere, each advocating independence and regarding the land entrusted to them by the Emperor as their own. At that time without a strong central power, there were no military administration and the army had its own administrative unit. To be clearer it meant that in the Empire there where multiple Kings totaling dozens. In this scenario even the Emperor is but ‘one of the kings’.”

“That was common knowledge. After that, feeling a sense of looming crisis in the politically and militarily lacking Empire, from the powerful warlords, three forces stood out and crowned the Emperor as the absolute monarch. They were the Igsem, Remeon and Yurgus… the nowadays called ‘Loyal Triad’ families.”

“Yes, their objective was a central administration for political and military affairs, and putting those powers in the hands of the ‘Emperor’. This practice would reduce the risk of internal strife and create a system which could wholeheartedly fight foreign enemies.

Of course this was not an easy task since conflict could not be avoided with the selfishly proclaimed local warlords. But even so, in order to promote reforms, the loyal triad had to substantially reduce the amount of warlord clans. In other words, they used the tool called war to destroy them, but the process was not an eradication done indiscriminately and without distinction, they thought it through and made survival impossible only to hostile families. Among those who lived, there are families existing still today, the Tetdrich is one of such… them and the loyal triad are now called the old warlord families.”

“Exactly as you said…but what connection does this history have with ‘showpiece of Yatori’s swords’?”

“So, ah, the central government and the modern focus on order in the Katjvarna’s army… the one who established those foundations were no other but Yatori’s ancestor. As a descendant of the orthodox Igsem, even if she had real power, if she did not put on display, under clear view, on her waist the privilege they obtained, wouldn’t that be forfeiting history?”

“Hm, that is true… but in reality Yatori, no I should say all those related to Igsem, are allowed double swords isn’t it so?”

“Yeah. Thus those who initially got excited were not the Igsem. After the long period of chaos… at the completion of the centralization of political and military power, while the Igsem family head was reporting of those success to the Emperor, he had at his side the two blades he considered part of his soul. But in order to establish the supremacy of ‘Order’ in the newly formed national army, he first had to devoid himself of his individuality.

On the other hand, the Emperor felt puzzled. Since the Emperor put a vast amount of trust in Igsem, losing the two swords that could be called a symbol of Igsem was a very serious issue. Although the Emperor tried to persuade him with various reason, the stubbornly loyal Igsem didn’t show any will to compromise. As he was the monarch, the Emperor could simply order ‘You shalt not discard thine swords’ but giving orders with no proper reason could form cracks in their relationship. The Emperor was fret by this but in the end he did not waste efforts as he finally found an excuse.”

Hearing that her Highness the Princess suddenly remembered.

“… Is that so, this is the story about the ‘Undefeated Oath’ right?”

“Correct. To the unwilling Igsem the Emperor said ‘Although you are forfeiting your swords for the Order, your swords have already become the honor of the Empire itself. The soldier step on the battlefield encouraged by the swords, the populace trusts the blades will defend the country so they can faithfully believe in us every day. This is obliviously the truth but you still intend to discard your swords, if this is not a disruption of Order then I don’t know what is.’”

“That was a really bad argument… and it shouldn’t have been generalized like that. But in those unsettling times, I guess everybody hoped there would be a Hero.”

“Igsem was touched by the speech and after reflecting on it, he said so: ‘Then, till these swords suffer a crushing defeat and fails to protect those it has to’. He swore to continue wielding the two swords until he is defeated in fight… this is also a strong declaration that he will definitely not enjoy the privilege of wielding two swords just because of his status.”

During the lengthy conversation between the two, at the center of the room the duel finally begun. Warrant Officer Hargunska attacked first, he raised the wooden sword over his head and swung it down with all his might.

“At the condition of being undefeated, the existence of Igsem’s double swords is allowed in the military, so it actually is a showpiece. It is a simple premise of incredible strength. If a Igsem want to succeed in having two swords at their waist, then they have to demonstrate to everybody the fact that they are the strongest.”

Yatori who sidestepped the enemy’s attack is for the moment only focusing on defense.

This is also a tacit understanding, if you truly are the strongest then there would be no need to rush in determining the winner.

To undertake all of enemy’s ability and then beautifully defeat the opponent. In a duel this

approach is the only allowed one for an Igsem.

“Not all Igsem descendant possessed such strong spirit. Since ‘Undefeated Oath’ is renewed every generation…. the ones who could keep the two swords at waist from their coming of age to the end of their life, even if you were to count the entirety of Igsem’s family tree, could be counted on your fingers.”

Although warrant officer Hargunska successfully performed an attack, his face still showed anxiety. That was a normal reaction as Yatori who received his fierce attack did not strike back. Even so, the position of the two hardly changed from their initial standing.

“Princess, you should have already seen this during the incident with Captain Ison– but it is a rare opportunity, please enjoy the spectacle… the rare incarnation of an undefeated person, the so called Igsem.”

Klang! At the ring of this crisp sound, the wooden sword in Warrant Officer Hargunska’s hand disappeared. Even if only a handful of people grasped the moment the sword flew, everyone raised their head to see the result of her action.

Chatter spread among the spectators– as the missing wooden sword is stabbed directly in the ceiling above.

“That surely can be called fortitude of the sword. I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to exchange blows with you Warrant Officer Hargunska.”

The winner, Yatori, started praising her opponent first. Even though it was just a step away from being considered sarcasm, Hargunska himself understood Yatori’s intentions.

Grasping the exact instant the wooden sword was about to be swung down, an upward hit carefully aimed at the hilt, such divine technique used the impact to make him lose grip. As for how far the sword would flew, it depended on how much upstream force there was. Thus by making the sword stuck on the ceiling proved not only she defeated the opponent but also the incredible strength she possessed.

“….. Brilliant, Yatorishino Igsem!”

Even with such landslide victory she has not insulting the opponent. This noble attitude would make even the loser feel admiration. Warrant Officer Hargunska, without even realizing it, stretched his right hand, Yatori also replied to the handshake with a smile.

The outcome of such impeccable duel made the public very excited. People flocked toward Yatori and the circle formed to observe the match quickly dissolved.

Ikta who stayed out of the crowd murmured with a blank face to the scene:

“That’s for safeguarding the current imperial system. Because she truly believes in your capability, princess, that she risked her life protecting you.”

“……..”

“Please don’t forget this fact, princess. No matter how big your dreams are, please absolutely never forget this.”

Maybe because he couldn’t stand watching Yatori being pushed around, Ikta after concluding the conversation stood up and calmly, with little efforts, mixed together with

the officers surrounding her.

The princess while thinking about the warning she just received, walked back to the seat of honor with a serious expression.

“…. I feel like the newcomers this year are all freaks.”

The ignored Lieutenant Sazaruf could only put out this thought.

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“Anyway, to tell the truth you guys arrived with the perfect timing, well, you could also call it the most boring time.”

With the endless mountains as background in the north, the soldiers marched uniformly. Walking at the front of the ranks, Lieutenant Sazaruf told the young officers.

“In fact, just a while back the tension here could be cut with a knife. Because of the difficulties the Eastern front was facing, I thought they would request reinforcements from the north.”

After Torway, who thought this was way too easy even for a military exercise asked, Lieutenant Sazaruf replied with a depressed expression while shaking his head.

“It goes without saying. That was the blazing war front even that Lieutenant General Rikan couldn’t handle, who would ever volunteer to go there? In the records of this Eastern War, most of the officials handling the final retreat have perished, including Lieutenant General Rikan himself.”

“But maybe by sending out a large amount of reinforcements we could have changed the outcome of the war.”

Matthew boldly interrupted with his opinion, making Lieutenant’s lips turn up in a grin.

“Quite brave opinion you have there… incidentally, warrant officer Tetdrich, people with such brave thoughts are called ‘Soldiers from Central’ in the northern region.”

“Huh? From Central?”

“Right, according to our sayings, Warrant Officer Deinkun who had a fight with miss Igsem at the welcome party is also that kind of person. Not long ago, that guy was insisting to send reinforcements to the east. Not to say about the problems he caused to his superior officer, he later went to discuss directly with the supreme commander and even wrote a voluntary letter to the Emperor, of course he was stopped by the disciplinary committee before sending it.”

“So… the phrase ‘Soldiers from Central’ is referring to very motivated people?”

Haro’s innocent question made the Lieutenant first widen his eyes, then burst into an uncontrollable laugh.

“T-That, don’t you want to go help?”

“…Wahahaaha! Yeah, that’s basically it Warrant Officer Bekkel. But to be more precise it means ‘Those who still have motivation even after being dispatched to the North’. Maybe the situation is different at Central but here those kind of people are the minority.”

After making these youths filled with dreams and passion widen their eyes, Lieutenant Sazaruf shifted his gaze toward the northern mountains, he then spread his arms as to embrace the scenery.

“And which mountain shall bear the responsibility!”

“…Are you referring to the Arfatra Mountains? Why is it so?”

“Do you even need to ask? Because those mountains will block the enemies in front of us.”

Lieutenant Sazaruf confidently made this assertion, but the young officers’ faces were caught in a surprised frown.

“‘Grand Arfatra is ‘God’s ladder’… In 900 years of Katjvarna Empire’s history never once as an enemy crossed those mountains to attack…so the name ‘God’s ladder’ originated because of that.”

“You are totally right Warrant Officer Remeon. It’s a shame, if I were an instructor I would draw you a flower circle.”

Tl note: in japan flowers are drawn on the test paper of children who scored the maximum

“Uhm… isn’t Lieutenant our standing instructor here?”

“What? Is it so? Then let’s really draw you a flower circle.”

Tl note: image

Saying that, Lieutenant took out a pen from his breast pocket and drew a flower on Torway’s forehead.

A laughter busted around him and Torway was left with an expression hard to describe.

“Even if enemies haven’t crossed the god’s ladder, there are people living over there right?”

Yatori who was silent until not interrupted with a sharp tone.

Hearing that, Lieutenant Sazaruf wanted to draw a flower on Yatori’s forehead too but seeing how easily she dodged with an upper body movement, he quickly gave up.

“…Huhuhu, you are right. Though the northern region has the protection of the Grand Arfatra, we can’t leave all the troublesome work to the mountains. In other words, our job is–”

“Natives risk control, or the management of the situation with the natives living on the Grand Arfatra Mountains, the Shinaak Tribe.”

Lieutenant Sazaruf nodded to Torway’s answer and proceeded to draw a second flower on his forehead.

“That’s it. In the mountain range lives many, who although are considered belonging to

the empire, are not thought as resident of Katjvarna, the people of Shinaak tribe. According to history we have not been harmonious with them. Even though for the last few hundred years there were no major conflict, small disputes often occur.”

“Meaning our job is to give those mountain rednecks a lesson? It’s almost like exterminating pests.”

The muscle-brain Agra said with a sneer, the Lieutenant shrugged his shoulder with a wry smile.

“While we do exterminate pests, our past job also included dealing with the brave men who wet their pants due to the shock… but now, even that has changed.”

“Changed? Why is it so?”

“Since two years ago, incidents with the Shinaak tribe have significantly diminished. Seems like those guy have turned page and don’t want to cause troubles anymore. In the past, maybe twice per month, if unlucky, five or six times, there were even days when you had to deal with mountain thieves at the same time. But for the past six months not even the operation ‘Send Punitive Force’ happened.”

To the ‘Many Battles’ they heard before coming here, this news made disappointment appear on the majority of the motivated young warrant officers’ faces, only Yatori and Torway had a severe expression.

When the talks ended, the march resumed. Unable to tolerate the boredom, the muscle-brain Agra complained with dissatisfaction:

“Lieutenant, I know that this battalion is idle now, so what is the exercise for? Since three hours ago we have been marching along the mountains to and fro, this can’t even be considered training!”

“You are right! But we cannot stop midway through, after all we used the excuse of training to put this display of military prowess. Maybe it is precisely because we send out these subtle messages: ‘So what? We have such military strength! We are very strong! Very scary!’ that peace is maintained. Furthermore, if we were to cancel even this then we would really just become idleness idiots. We absolutely have to avoid that, but…”

Lieutenant Sazaruf suddenly turned back and stared anxiously left and right to the officers behind him.

“…Warrant Officer Sorlok, what’s up? You’re not planning to say anything? I heard you would be the first one to cut in these chit chats.”

The main reason Lieutenant Sazaruf brought a pen with him was because he wanted to draw flowers circles on Ikta’s forehead, but no traces of the rookie could be found.

The members of ‘Order of Knights’ knew it since long ago but the other officers had only now noticed it and the commotion further spread.

“Ooi~ what happened to Warrant Officer Ikta? Nobody saw him but the third illumination platoon seems to be here…”

“…I-I have something to report, Lieutenant”

Standing directly behind the officers and managing the troops, Sergeant Suuya cautiously opened her mouth, with a surprised look Lieutenant Sazaruf turned to her.

“Sergeant Mittokalif, your report is?”

“This is a message from Warrant Officer Sorlok: Because of a violation of the military rules, I’m voluntarily confining myself in the punishment cell. The violation is abandoning the exercise without permission…”

Without any pretense or excuse, instead using directly the action as a reasoning, he went straightforward with such declaration.

Lieutenant Sazaruf finally came back to his senses after blanking out for a minute.

He, who didn’t know what reaction to show, took out the pen from his chest pocket.

“…It seems I was wrong. What I have to draw on his forehead is not a flower but a big red X”

Thus, he learned a way to deal with the problematic person named Ikta Sorlok.

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“I can’t accept this!”

A female soldier shouted. Her trembling anger even propagated to the brown ribbon tied to her ponytail.

That day, some disturbance happened at the base as well. The object at the center of the dispute was the big bookshelf placed in front of the female quarters.

“It is unbearable right, PFC Kanna?”

TL note PFC= Private First Class

The target of her anger— Lieutenant Talca whose main facial feature is having a squared face, is hardly even considering her protest.

He took out another book from the shelf and started appraising it, his attention is now wholly focused on this action.

“Why must all the books in our barracks be confiscated!”

On the contrary, the female soldier– this year was her third enlisted year with the wind spirit Tabb as partner, she, of the air shooter troops, Kanna Temari felt very indignant. That tomboy face was contorted to the point it could be called furious.

She was not a recruit and knew well that going against a superior officer brought no

benefit. But to her, the current situation was a moment she had to talk back even fully knowing that.

“Then I ask you, why should we cram the soldiers’ sleeping place with bookshelves full of books?”

Lieutenant Talca replied with in a cold tone, after gathering all her strength, Kanna replied.

“Because the people living here read books when they are free from training! Because having a lot of books is great but they cost a lot, so everybody put their property in one place as shared property, you should understand that!”

“It is, please understand that, right? No matter how much time passes you never learn how to be polite.”

“Guh! Don’t try… please don’t try to change to topic, we are now discussing the matter regarding these books!”

Other female soldiers also showed their face from the windows of the barrack, nervously observing the situation from the sidelines. Though sharing the same opinion as Kanna that the confiscation was unfair, they couldn’t muster the courage to go against a superior officer.

“Sigh, so you are claiming ownership of these books as your private property?”

“It can be regarded as such. Although not so much as private property, in fact it is shared property among everybody living here… and there should be no military regulation against bringing in books, right?”

Kanna, having no confidence in her memory, spoke fuzzily. Lieutenant Talca ridiculed her.

“That excuse won’t work, where are you leaving your books?”

“At the end of the corridor. We especially made a bookshelf so that everybody could easily pick a book…”

“That is the problem. PFC Kanna, you should recall the regulation told to recruits. The space allocated for private property is only your room, you remember?”

“Ughh…”

“Even in the living quarters, the corridor is public space. So the books left here are considered public goods of the base, in other words, they are property of the northern garrison. As the supervisor of the living quarters, whether they should be confiscated or discarded is for me to decide.”

“This… this is nitpicking! Indeed, only us put a bookshelf there, but considering the end of the corridor as common space is a something that happens in every dorm!”

“Even if there is such practice, it still remains just a practice. Of course you have to consider the written rules first, finished talking? Good, take them.”

Lieutenant Talca made a gesture to the two male soldiers who, by the look of their eyes, seemed like they were forced to come. However, Kanna continued to pester the superior who unilaterally ended the argument and tried to leave.

“Even so, why did you confiscate without a warning! If the issue is occupying public space, then you could just have told us to bring them back to our rooms–”

“…Tsk! Ooi! Is that the attitude you should have when talking to a superior officer?”

Lieutenant Talca shouted with a tone completely different from the previous indifferent attitude, which scared Kanna so much that she forgot to breath.

“A mere soldier dares to be so arrogant, before talking irrationally think about your standing! The ones who broke the regulation were you, as a supervisor I have to take measures for it. In moment like this you should not be telling excuses but self-reflecting! Isn’t it so!”

Compared to looking down on people, Lieutenant Talca who is now forcing others to accept his own justice made Kanna grit her teeth as she was unable to defend herself. Shrinking when the superior officer is yelling was already a conditioned reflex instilled in soldiers.

“Moreover, reading is an entertainment of the rich, this interest to you, foot soldiers, are just not knowing your own places! Since you have time to read such stupid entertainment why don’t you increase your stamina by running laps! Really, this kind of boring stuff…”

Lieutenant Talca while speaking with disdain, took out an old looking book from the bookshelf. Seeing that cover, Kanna’s face paled.

“W-wait! Don’t be so rough!”

“Hmm, seeing your panicking expression, is this your book? <Records of Grand Arfatra>? I noticed this because the binding looked luxurious…huh? Where have I seen this author before…?”

Lieutenant Talca frowned his eyebrows in thinking, a few seconds later he breathed out with upturned eyes.

“This… isn’t this written by that ‘Blasphemer’ Anarai Khan! Not only he insulted our great God with weird experiments but then even fled to Kioka, our enemies, becoming one of the most hated defectors! PFC Kanna! To think you like books written by criminals!”

“The… the contents of a book have no correlation with its author…”

Kanna tried to argue back, but this instead only made Lieutenant Talca rage more.

“You are still making excuses! Really intolerable! Brace yourself!”

Lieutenant Talca lifted the hand holding the book, thinking she was going to get beaten, Kanna shut her eyes.

“No, no, no, this method is wrong.”

The black haired youth who moved between the two stopped the Lieutenant in the nick of time by grabbing his wrist.

“Books are not tools to beat others, furthermore a girl’s face shouldn’t be hit in the first place. I thought that was common knowledge in this world.”

“Who the hell are you!”

“I’m an Imperial Knight who happened to pass by, my mission is to make all older women in the world never cry again.”

Ikta said those creepy lines with a straight face.

Lieutenant Talca frowned.

“Imperial Knight… so you are a member of the legendary ‘Order of Knights’? The name of the black haired black eyed guy should be Ikta Sorlok correct… you didn’t seem very conspicuous at the welcome party.”

“It’s because I’m not good at attracting attention, even though I look like this, I’m pretty humble.”

“Then, what’s the meaning of your right hand?”

Lieutenant Talca fiercely stared, Ikta then simply released the grip suppressing the other’s hand.

“I apologize for intervening without authorization in the dispute, but after hearing your conversation so far, I’m feeling quite concerned about something.”

Ikta moved to the bookshelf while saying so and looked with memorable interest at the books lined there.

“…Oh the ordering of this bookshelf is not bad at all. Fictional novels and specialized books are separated according to their genre, although there are old books none of them are in bad condition, the residents must all be careful readers.”

“So what–”

“Since the invention of letter pressing technology, compared to the past where books were handwritten, books have become an existence much closer to people. Coupled with an increase in literacy, the reading demographic spread to the general population.”

Ikta interrupted the Lieutenant with swaggerish statements while ignoring him, this thick nerved attitude made Kanna speechless.

“Having said so, books are still not commodities that could be thoughtlessly purchased. It may be different in twenty years’ time, but right now the limit should be ‘spurge to buy one at a special occasion’… but since this is the case, sellers also devised various strategies.”

Ikta selected two books from the shelf and raised them with his hands.

“On the cover of this <Flower girl Lisrei> is written ‘a gift to your dearest daughter’, this <Yobzniek’s Knight> has ‘given to the son who will be braver than anyone else’. One can tell with a glance alone that these lines have nothing to do with the story, it’s just propaganda to promote sales. The focus here should be ‘parents who buy book for their children’ as the main target of sales.

The important product itself is a good fit for this strategy. No matter whether it is <Flower Girl Lisrei> or <Yobzniek’s Knight>, the protagonist was always the kind that would make parents think ‘It would be great if my child could become someone like that’. But if you think about it calmly you will find different aspects in which they are just too

perfect.”

Ikta exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulder, then continued talking.

“Within the scope of my knowledge, the pioneering books that used such strategies are these two. Then, many other works successfully adopted the same concept thus making the notion of books in the Empire become: ‘For the coming of age of their children, one must spurge in buying a pricey book’. The end result of such epidemic thinking is nowadays, the only property many youths have, is the one book their parents gifted them.”

After leading the discourse here, Ikta suddenly knocked lightly on the bookshelf while exposing a smile with deeper meanings.

“Each of these are not cheap. Although some are old, but with this many it is worth a fortune— don’t you think so, Lieutenant?”

“What…?”

Kanna abruptly moved her sight line because of the surprise, only to see Lieutenant Talca with a stiff expression.

“W-What are you talking about…?”

“Oh, you’re still playing the fool, I see. After confiscating their books, you are planning to resell them right? There’s no other reason you would do something so troublesome. At first I thought you were the kind to enjoy seeing their subordinates suffer, but contrary to that your expression wasn’t that of joy… The deciding factor was you confirming each book one by one, those were certainly the eyes of someone appraising goods.”

The female soldiers, who were waiting in their residences for the storm to pass, had some reaction to Ikta’s statement and Kanna put their doubts into actual words.

“You don’t mean… that Lieutenant wanted to earn some pocket money by taking our books…?”

“W-What nonsense! What proof do you have…!”

Subject of countless angry stares, Lieutenant Talca’s head broke in a cold sweat. At this point Ikta chased with his attacks.

“…<The handsome Badilan>, <The rose of Miyajan>, <Parsek and Urpina>, <Records of Darius’ Generation>.”

“…Urgh!”

“These are the works you took out from the shelves earlier in order to ascertain their condition… it’s not like you’d want to read those, then why were you so clear about these? They are works that could be sold at high price and are popular in an old book market.”

“Haa…Argh…!”

“If my life had smoothly progressed, I was originally supposed to work as librarian at the National Library of the Capital and keep a peaceful life. If you want to earn money by selling old books, instead of the over printed popular works, one would earn much more by selling hard to get niche works to collectors. You sure are very knowledgeable about such market.”

“Gah…!”

“You have already contacted the buyer right? Eyeing an easy tar—kah!”

A fist cruelly connected to Ikta’s stomach. With raging eyes, the lieutenant chased the youth who was stomping the ground due to pain.

“You bastard, don’t fiddle in other’s business… since I heard you were cherished by the third princess I wanted to resolve this peacefully… but seeing to which point you insulted me, I see no other choice…!”

Lieutenant Talca threw away the <Records of Grand Arfatra> he was holding, raised the newly freed hands and slowly approached the opponent.

Ikta retreated while coughing.

“Cough cough… gosh turning to violence so easily, please listen till I finish talking.”

“You’re on your deathbed, keep saying all the bullshit you want!”

Ikta while avoiding Lieutenant’s hands, still sprouted words.

“Yes, yes, yes, since you said so I won’t restrain myself anymore— what I really wanted Lieutenant to understand is that the value of books is not only ‘entertainment of the rich’. Now please allow me to demonstrate it to you.”

“You can prove it while I hit your face to deformity?”

“The books will teach me the strength to not fall into that predicament, anyway this a bit sudden but allow me to ask you a question Lieutenant. Do you like insects? Or do you hate them?”

“I never considered whether I liked them, since mere insects are just bugs… If I sighted any, I could just stomp on it.”

“Oyaoya that’s really forthright. But you know, in this world there are all kinds of insects, some fly in the sky, some can move really fast, some have extremely powerful venom too. Without any preparation would you be able to confront such threats?”

Even during these conversations, the lieutenant continued cornering Ikta toward the wall. Kanna thought of intruding and stopping them before blood is shed, but halted after the youth who was getting cornered sent her a rejecting look.

“One last thing. If you think the soldierly spirit is almighty, you’re going to face lots of hardships.”

“Don’t use that understanding tone to judge something you didn’t have to begin with– Die!”

Seeing his prey with the back against the wall, Lieutenant Talca, who had long awaited this opportunity, exclaimed.

At the same time Ikta jumped backward– even knowing he only had the wall behind him, he still took the initiative to hit it.

Receiving the impact, something fell from the ceiling of the dormitory. The next moment, Ikta without hesitation grabbed the thing that fell in front of him- -then proceeded to threw

it to Lieutenant's face.

"Wha…?"

His gesture could not be called a punch so Lieutenant was fearlessly facing that.

What he saw were eight hairy legs wriggling around, only two centimeters away from his eyes, constantly wriggling and making rustling sounds.

"–GyAAaAAa!"

A scream resounded from Lieutenant's throat while he jumped back. His action was not a result of rational judgement, but instead the fear mechanism all mammals have developed that couldn't be resisted.

The as the only one who knew the events would unfold this way, the youth chased the fleeting enemy. After reaching the lieutenant, Ikta pulled on the collar of his shirt and ripped off the top two buttons, then taking advantage of the gap created in the shirt he, in one swift action, threw in 'that thing' he held in his right hand.

The lieutenant clearly saw what that was.

"GuaAaAaaaaaaAA!"

He panicked. No, it's not enough to describe it with panic alone, he frenzied. Lieutenant Talca desperately reached into the shirt but 'that thing' with extreme agility avoided his hands by moving left and right. Hearing rustling sounds and feeling hairy arthropod legs crawling around your skin can make your reason disappear in an instant.

Endless screams came from the Lieutenant.

The more he tried to reach with his hands in order to get it out, the deeper it went. During the struggle, unknowingly how it did it, that thing actually went into his pants. Feeling that hairy touch, the initial fear that was meant as a defense mechanism erupted from each pore of his body. The lieutenant with painful screams continued to hit his whole body.

Facing the unreal crazed scenery, the female soldiers could only stare in astonishment at the Lieutenant's actions.

"GuaAaAaaaaaaAA!UghaaRg!GyAAaAAa!!!"

Nobody knew how long such battle lasted… whether it was seconds or minutes or even more.

Then when Lieutenant forfeited all resistance to his dignity as a soldier, that thing finally left the tight military uniform.

An eight legged shadow, about as big as an adult's hand was quickly running away on the sandy road, Ikta only saluted it till it disappeared from sight.

"Good work, you successfully completed the mission Sergeant Heteropoda Venatoria… If throwing centipedes at people is be considered a prank, then the move I did earlier must be classified as esoteric prohibition. If there's someone not afraid of that move, they must have the name Igsem…"

Ikta looked at the Lieutenant who is already lying absent minded on the ground, and

continued:

“However, if you have read the book you had just thrown away… the <Records of Grand Arfatra>, you could have avoided this tragedy, after all I gave you such a big clue when I said ‘Insect’. You just had to know that during the day, they like to avoid the sun by resting on ceiling and near corners… then you would have noticed I wasn’t just running away but leading you to where ‘that thing’ was. Now you understand don’t you? The value of the books I talked about earlier was referring to this, Lieutenant.”

Even without knowing whether the other was listening, Ikta continued explaining.

This is the oblige of the winner.

“Although it possesses a scaring appearance, heteropoda venatoria is a very common animal. Since they protect the crops from harmful insects, lots of them are raised in Shinaak tribe’s barn. They are expert hunters that predates on pest, but will not harm humans and their crop. Even with that look heteropoda venatoria is definitely a useful insect. What I just did was out of emergency, good children should no imitate.”

Tl note: image, follow at your own risk

The grabbing of a spider alone, normal people wouldn’t be able to do that… Kanna complained in her heart. In front of her she could see Ikta illumining Lieutenant Talca’s eyes with Kusu’s high beam.

“Ahhh… this is not good huh… Ooi~ you two over there, can you please bring this guy to the infirmary? You don’t have to bother with the bookshelf anymore.”

Hearing Ikta sprouting those sluggish words, the two soldiers, who were on standby observing the evolving situation, exposed a face as if saying they finally had something to do, and begun to move.

Accordingly, they were just ordered to come help and didn’t have any connection with Lieutenant Talca.

The two lifted the fainted body of the supervisor and left the living quarters from the front door.

“Sigh… I’m so tired… Originally I didn’t want to knock him out… Today I had to solve this all by myself, maybe because of that I overdid a little…”

Ikta murmured a complain while picking up the book thrown by the lieutenant.

“Great, it wasn’t damaged…. there you go, this yours right? Take it.”

“Ah…”

Kanna reflexively grabbed the book Ikta threw to her after dusting it.

“T-thank God… Thanks. Ah… no… Thank you very much for your help, Warrant Officer.”

After panicky fixing her wording, she, with a desperate look stared at Ikta’s face.

“……Can you call me Ikkun? Ah, no, to normal people I should perhaps be more gradual…? But to be honest in the battle before I consumed all the energy that should have

been put in this as well… ah, right, what is your name?”

While that was an incomprehensible request, Kanna didn’t have any reason to refuse, furthermore he was her benefactor.

“I belong to the first northern regimen PFC Kanna Temari, my partner is the wind spirit Tabb. Pleased to meet you, uhm… officer Ikkun.”

“Officer Ikkun huh… well whatever. Ah, nice to meet you, Kanna. This may sound a bit sudden but you are my fellow junior apprentice.”

“What…? Ju-Junior apprentice…?”

Without understanding the meaning Kanna tilted her head, Ikta then explained by indicating the book in her hands:

“You have read that book right? Then that makes you a ‘Disciple of Anarai’. Though you appear to be older than me, I have been a disciple for a long time thus making me your senior.”

After Ikta finished speaking, a smile full of familiarity surfaced on his lips.

With no reason at all, Kanna’s heartbeats accelerated.

“Uh…Ah… That means… Officer Ikkun was this author’s… Professor Anarai Khan’s disciple…? Ah… No… May I inquire if it is so?”

“Yes, it is so. You and I are both believers of Science.”

Also a believer of science. Though she didn’t quite understand the meaning, that remark left a deep impression in her heart.

“I say, Kanna, which part of this book you think is most interesting?”

Ikta asked in a casual tone. This kind of attitude does not show normally and it made Kanna very curious. Because this is the first time she discovered someone she could discuss something like this with.

“Ah…Umm… It should be… the part regarding the study of the Alderah church.”

Ikta’s shoulder shook with surprise, this was not an answer he anticipated.

“…The studying of the Alderah church? Not the faith the Shinaak Tribe have on the spirits?”

“Ye-Yes…That is, after studying the spirit beliefs of the Shinaak and then comparing them to the Alderah faith of the Empire, you can then find all kinds of wonderful things–”

Seeing how Kanna hesitatingly begun to explain, Ikta wanted to keep listening to her–but at that instant, his head was firmly grabbed by someone from behind.

“…Weren’t you supposed to be in voluntary confinement? Warrant Officer Sorlok.”

Ikta timidly turned back, as expected, appearing in front of him with a twisted smile was Lieutenant Sazaruf.

The youth spoke with a blue face.

“…Crap, to think I had such an oversight, I stayed here at my own leisure for too long…!”

“That statement alone is cheeky enough. Sure, there were unmotivated people among higher ups’ students, but for you to skip the exercise to flirt with a girl, you might be the first one in history.”

Without saying another word, Lieutenant Sazaruf grabbed Ikta’s collar and started dragging him to the punishment cell. Even so, the youth with no intention to reflect on his action shouted to Kanna who was staring blankly:

“Kanna, we will surely meet again! We will then continue this conversation! This is a promise!”

“Ah… Yes…?”

“Yeah, yeah, this is truly youthfulness… but I really hope you can survive till your next meeting.”

The problem child was dragged away by a deviously smiling Lieutenant Sazaruf leaving behind only a sand trail.

“…What…what just happened…”

Even after the images of the two disappeared, Kanna still kept dazing for a while. But if she didn’t hurry to put the books and the bookshelf back in the dormitory they would get damaged.

Thus she turned around to search for someone who would help carry the shelf. Right then a strong gust of wind blew laterally making the pages of the <Records of Grand Arfatra> in her hands turn pages after pages. The turnings finally stopped when they reached the book’s cover, on the first page there was a sentence to the prospect reader, a message left there by the author.

–Welcome to the world of Science!

These words were like what the youth had said, enclosing an incredible warmth.

***

With the rough escort of the supervisor, Ikta went straight to the punishment cell located in the inner side of the base. It was no larger than three square meters, completely devoid of any light, even the monitoring window was barred, it was no different from a prison.

“Warrant Officer Sorlok. How many days have you lasted with no food or water?”

Hearing the terrifying question Lieutenant asked from over the monitoring window, Ikta seriously though about it.

“… are snacks considered food?”

“Of course, also your clever tricks won’t work in here.”

“Then, are insects considered snacks?”

“Don’t look for weird gray areas. Food means anything besides air that you can put in

your mouth.”

Ikta tried to gain some time with these jokes while hard thinking– if he were to make a single mistake then it would probably result in tragedy. He must find the right amount of time, not too long nor too short, something that the other will find appropriate.

“Then around three days I guess…”

Hearing the youth’s final answer, Lieutenant Sazaruf lightly nodded.

“I see; then let’s try leaving you in here for 300 days.”

“You just multiplied it 100 fold! Won’t I starve to death whatever my answer was!?”

Ikta knocked strongly on the door with both hands, the one on the other side, Lieutenant Sazaruf, with his back against the door, sat down.

“C’mon, don’t be so agitated. You skipped the exercise without permission, you have no excuse on this. You didn’t think you would be let off with just some light punishment right?”

“Even so, I didn’t think that as a first time offender I would be given a death sentence!”

“I don’t really plan to leave you here till you die. But if I didn’t render you weak enough, who doesn’t know when to talk, from using that mouth, then don’t you think it would be hard to maintain my position as superior?”

Sigh– Lieutenant Sazaruf after heavily sighing, continued:

“…To tell you the truth, I really can’t understand. What kind of ideas brought you to your current situation?”

“Even if you ask me the ideas I had, I can’t really answer that… to be clearer, 100% of them were compelling circumstances”

“If that is so, then the rumors wouldn’t be so action packed and exciting right? Even if I considered you getting knighted was a complete lucky stroke, then what about the incident regarding the attempted kidnapping of the third princess? No matter how I look at it, the positive outcome could only be attributed to your swift actions.”

“About that, it would be annoying if I denied so let’s leave it alone for now… but Lieutenant Sazaruf, do you perhaps have some prejudice against me?”

With Ikta’s sharp counterattack, the Lieutenant nodded while shrugging his shoulders.

“…. It may be so. Even if you look like a freak, that’s still just your outer appearance. I originally thought you were the standard type to strictly adhere to successfulness. That would be the oblivious conclusion right? After all, those kind of guys always flock to high ranked officers.”

“I think this would be a good example of misunderstanding the nature of an opponent because of prejudice.”

“Oh, I admit it. It looks like you don’t have the slightest interest in having success. Because if it were so the you wouldn’t have skipped an easy exercise which would create materials that could be held against you.”

“It’s not like everyone in ‘Order of Knights’ is the same as me. True, Haro might lack some ambition, but that’s just because she is humble. The remaining three are all very focused on having success, please don’t misunderstand this point.”

“You would even speak for your companions, I really can’t understand– Guh!”

Lieutenant Sazaruf received a strong hit on his back and head making him topple forward.

That was the result of Ikta’s incessant knocking, the hinges, which have deteriorated over the years, have succumbed to his unyielding efforts.

After receiving an unexpected help from fortune, Ikta jumped over the superior who was holding the back of his head with his hand and groaning in pain, and immediately tried to escape. However, something curious entered his field of view making him suddenly stop his movements.

“…What is closed in this cell? Kusu, shine some light.”

“Ouch… Hey! What are you doing! Don’t do things without permi–”

Before Lieutenant Sazaruf finished his warning, Kusu’s beam already dispelled the darkness in the cell. Small creatures that did not even reach a human’s knee reacted to the sudden light and trembled on the floor.

“…Wait…those are…”

The moment he recognized the identity of those creature, a similar trembling expression appeared on Ikta’s face.

“…Spirits! What is this? Why are spirits being held in such place–”

“Ahhh~ you shined on them… Warrant Officer Sorlok, tell your partner to stop the light, this is an order.”

Hearing the commanding tone Lieutenant Sazaruf issued his order, Ikta could only turn off the light for the time being. Because of that, one couldn’t see the shapes of the spirits anymore, only their highly reflective irises shone in the darkness like those of a cat’s.

“…Lieutenant, can you explain what is this?”

Lieutenant Sazaruf revealed an expression as if saying ‘the troublesome guy has seen it huh’ and scratched his head.

“In short, it’s as you can see.”

“No, no, although it is weird that I’m the one saying this, isn’t that an abnormal scenery? ‘The spirit and its contractor shalt always be together, no one shalt violate the will of the two forcing them to separate’–this is at the base of the teachings of the Alderamin church, and shouldn’t this principle be upheld even in battle against enemies?”

“The war has already ended, furthermore this is the northern region far from the frontlines, these can’t be spirits that are awaiting to be returned, even if that were so such treatment is not reasonable. Because they don’t receive enough light, they are not able to move.”

The four spirit uses light as energy. Though there are exceptions, light is indeed their main source of vitality, this kind of resource could be ‘stored beforehand’ making it a common

sight, in clear days, spirits growing thin, membrane like, wings and bathe in the sun.

“These spirits have been locked in such dark environment for far too long making them unable to move. To a human standpoint that would be imprisonment, starvation and abuse of the spirits… What is the objective behind this, and who gave the orders for it to be conducted?”

Ikta put away his evil intents and with his spirit partner stared at the superior.

Lieutenant Sazaruf, unable to stand their impeaching looks, shook his head as if trying to avoid it.

“Don’t talk like I’m the culprit… I will tell you since you saw that. The one who ordered this is no one else than the supreme commander of the northern region Lieutenant General Safida.”

When that name appeared, Ikta immediately figured out the situation.

“…I see; they were taken away from the Shinaak tribe who are in tension with the military right?”

“As expected of you, that’s correct, you understand very quickly.”

“Because when I shined on them, all I saw were wind and fire spirits. Among the four spirits, these two kinds can be directly used as weapons…Air guns and fire. Without these two, in the modern warfare, their battle prowess would significantly decrease. So I can understand from a strategic point of view the merit of removing them.”

“You are pretty smart… well, that’s the nutshell of the situation. Facing the long-lasting and never ending conflicts with the Shinaak Tribe, this is our last resort in restraining them. By confiscating both spirits and weapons from those troublesome guys we prevent after fires.”

Although those words came out of his own mouth, Lieutenant Sazaruf’s nature could not approve of such ruthless methods and while he was speaking, he moved his gaze around in an awkward manner.

Ikta ignored the officer and deeply though about the case with severe expression.

“I don’t want to advocate its justice or ethicality, but if we were all just respecting the rules, then under those conditions we absolutely wouldn’t be able to win wars. Still– about this method in particular, there are several parts that makes me feel uneasy.”

“…What is bothering you? At least in practice, this method proved to be effective. Even with their recent subdued behavior, people still find that hard to believe.”

As a base for his reasoning, lieutenant Sazaruf told him about the recent decrease in small scale conflicts… However even after hearing this, the doubts covering the youth’s face didn’t disappear.

“The possibility for this strategy to affect the war might be high… but does it really create the effect desired by Lieutenant General Safida?”

“For the past half year, they almost never rioted, they clearly calmed down.”

“It maybe so, or may not… the only thing I can really assert is… the nature of this method

is like a scumbagish, forced approach to a child throwing tantrum.”

“Scumbagish forced approach…?”

“If it were me, I would have avoided this method. After all, just the thought of rising contents inside a pressure pot makes me scared… and the most important part is that this way, the opponent now has the right to call their fight a just cause, ‘Retrieve our brutally ravished partners’, this is a simple but righteous call for arms.”

Ikta muttered some inauspicious predictions and while doing so walked past Lieutenant Sazaruf. He crossed the iron barred door, stepping with heavy footsteps, gradually moved toward the brightly illuminated corridor.

“Stop, where are you planning to go!”

–Just a step away from a successful escape, Lieutenant’s extended arm grabbed him, completely stopping his plan to escape amid the confusion.

“…Huh…weird, isn’t the scenario that was supposed to happen the ‘Sazaruf blankly watched him get away’?”

“Your theory sure is interesting… but unfortunately, my personality doesn’t allow me to be too bother by matters outside of the garrison.”

After finishing with a smile, he grabbed Ikta’s collar and threw him back in the closest punishment cell.

The Lieutenant then locked the room and carefully inspected the hinges. This door’s hinges did not show any sign of deterioration.

“Since you amused me with your speech, I kindly deduct 295 days from your sentence, hang in there.”

“I have to starve for five days?! That’s too much! When I go back to Central, I will surely report this mistreatment to high ranked officials! I will make local officer’s salary reduce to desperate amounts! I definitely will!”

“So you resorted to this trick… you know; I don’t really hate such forthright attitude. Perhaps it is people like you that in the end will become the typical elite.”

Not knowing how serious he was when he made such remark, Lieutenant Sazaruf left the brig. Even after he disappeared from sight, Ikta kept shouting curses through the metal railing for a long time.

***

One week after reaching the northern domains, when High Grade Military Officer Cadets and their subordinates finally started getting used to the life there…

“Accept my challenge! Oh youngest of Remeons!”

The members of order of knights minus Ikta, resting on the tables outside of the canteen were shocked when Warrant Officer Deinkun intruded with a thunderous voice.

This time though, his fingers pointed to a different opponent.

“…Huh? Eh? Me? Not Yatori-san?”

“Today I want to challenge you! Good, if you are a man of the Empire, readily accept my challenge!”

“But… I’m not good with the sword… ”

Torway hesitatingly responded, making a discontent look appear on Deinkun’s face.

“What you say!? Nevertheless, you are a soldier who received knighthood from his Majesty the Emperor! If you can’t even swing a sword you won’t be able to protect the princess you’re serving!”

Maybe because he hit where it hurts, Torway could only lower his head and remain silent… But Deinkun’s unilateral intrusion and his rebukes irked the other present as well.

“You should know some restrain, warrant officer Deinkun. Do you plan to ridicule my knight in front of me?”

The tone of her Highness Chamille was ice cold because, the same reason she didn’t like when Yatori was challenged during the welcome party, she hated the primitive way of ‘determining the hierarchy by sword’.

“First, Torway’s specialty is shooting. If we were to talk about his skills as air gunner, he won’t fall behind anyone else; in the modern battlefield that technique is much more valuable than swordsmanship–”

“I apologize for my rudenessssssss!”

Before she even finished speaking, Warrant Officer Deinkun prostrated in an exaggerated manner that could probably have broken the flooring.

The princess, only halfway through her speech, was staring at the scene with her mouth half open.

“……No, what I meant was… instead of wooden swordplay, you should pay more attention to individual strength…”

“This subordinate’s rudenessssssss!”

“…. You were judging a person’s value from just one single aspect, that’s not a commendable behavior….”

“Please do forgiveeeeeeee!”

The princess, who wanted to start a debate with him but because of his actions, now looked like someone had poured a buckle of cold water on her… looking closer, Warrant Officer Deinkun did not have the slightest intention to retort her words. He was displaying complete obedience as if the words he was about to hear were those of an oracle.

But the princess’ puzzled look did not last long… Although a bit extreme, this was the natural conduct of an imperial citizen. Words spoken by royalties are absolute, the ones who could refute in such situation were rare.

Even the completely familiar members of the order of knights wouldn’t undertake a war of

words with her Highness, there was only one exception, and because of how she always thought about that exception lately, it led astray the princess' common knowledge.

"How about shoji? Warrant Officer Deinkun. If it's shoji, then Torway is very good too."

Sensing the complex feelings in her Highness Chamille's, Yatori cheerfully proposed a solution. The princess also nodded as if she has just been saved.

"It is alright now; you can lift your head Warrant Officer Deinkun… I also agree with Yatori's proposal. Sometimes you need to demonstrate your excellency as soldier with the foresight you have on top a board of chess instead of sword skills, so?"

"Yes sir! To receive a chance to redeem myself, I feel very honored!"

Deinkun stood up full of spirit.

Yatori, who proposed this, immediately went to the closet at the corner of the canteen and brought the board and the pieces. After setting everything properly, the two sat across each other.

"This way you have nothing to complain about! Show me your full strength, oh youngest of Remeon!"

"Ha…Haha…please be lenient…"

Attacking first, Warrant Officer Deinkun used strength that could easily break the board in two to move his piece. Although Torway was intimidated by his vigor, he still breathed in deeply and started planning the early scheme.

At about ten minutes after the start, under the gaze of the audience, the outcome of the battle was quickly settled–

"Sorry, this is checkmate…."

"Guaaaah!"

Torway won the match in just 54 moves, even Matthew on the sideline was left dumbfounded.

"…Weak, it is way too weak. Why did he attack when he was at disadvantage?"

"D-Defense is not for me! As the general, I must compensate the lack of troops with morale!"

Tl note: general here is the most important piece in shogi (like the king in chess)

"Since this is shogi, no matter how hard you try the pieces' performance won't change~"

The logical words Matthew and Haro said mercilessly stabbed into Deinkun's back. Unable to bear the humiliation, he stood up with shaking shoulders, with almost teary eyes, stared at Torway.

"You are a dreadful man, Torway Remeon… but, don't think this is over!"

"Hah, sure. If it is shoji, I can fight anytime…"

After hearing the promise of a rematch, Warrant Officer Deinkun turned his back and left the canteen with a dignified demeanor unlike that of a someone who lost.

“Don’t block my way! Get out!”

“Woah….”

His big body with its momentum kicked a nearby object away as if it were trash, looking closely, with looks similar to that of a newborn fawn, the one trying to get up with shaky knees was in truth Ikta.

He gasped out some sounds from his dried up lips, then collapsed directly in front of the canteen. Panicking, the princess stood up and ran to where Ikta was.

“You… what happened Sorlok! To be so haggard…! I heard you were locked in the punishment cell; it couldn’t be they didn’t give you food right…?”

“Wa-water…”

“You want water? Wait… Kya! What are you doing! Don’t lick my neck!”

With a strong instinct seeking for water, the dehydrated Ikta with clouded awareness extended his tongue to lick the sweaty neck.

A chill ran down the princess’ spine.

“Uauaua! You can’t Ikta-san! It’s her Highness the princess!”

“Have you gone mad?! Here, there’s water here– Hua, the kettle is empty? …There’s no other choice, Haro, does Miru have some water stored?”

“Ah… yes, there should be enough for one person! Miru, please!”

Miru after being lifted by its master, moved the horizontally protruding ‘Water faucet’ in front of Ikta. At first he didn’t react but after a droplet fell on Ikta’s lips, it worked as a detonator causing him to excitedly hold onto the faucet, he finally gulped down the long desired water. During this, Chamille, whose body was still stuck to Ikta, didn’t seem too bothered, but maybe its thinking too deeply into things.

After drying up Miru’s internal reserve, Ikta finally separated his mouth from the ‘Water faucet’, then dropped his head and lied down on the lap of the princess who was still next to him.

“……Aahhhh… I’m still alive.”

“Oh, did your consciousness come back? Seriously, Ikta-san when was the last time you drank?”

“Six whole days ago… that damned Lieutenant Sazaruf, even saying something like ‘Sorry, sorry, I forgot the date’…”

“But you put yourself in that predicament right? If you are okay now, move away from the princess!”

After Yatori’s words, Ikta finally realized on whose lap his head had been resting till now. He and the princess, who was still red on face because of what just happened, kept silently staring at each other.

“…….Sorlok, don’t you have anything to say to me?”

“…Yes. If I wanted to enjoy a lap pillow, I should have found a more abundant one– Guhee!”

Her Highness Chamille’s downward swing already hit his nose before Ikta could finish his sentence. Afterward the princess stared with teary eyes at Ikta who rolled down her lap because of the pain.

“You should have just starved to death!”

“Ugh… Please don’t shout, if you were to leave me alone I will starve to death sooner or later… ahh~ I’m so hungry. I don’t even have the energy to grab insects…”

Ikta meekly laid down on the floor, at that moment a small bag landed on his concave, starved stomach. Yatori gently threw that bag without a word.

“Resurrect faster, if you were to kick the bucket in such place you would only bring troubles to the base.”

Hearing that, Ikta happily opened the bag to see inside some toasted bread, a piece of papaya and also some mutton. All of them were meals provided to the personnel in these days.

“As expected of Yatori, such wonderful and considerate gesture!”

Right after finishing speaking, Ikta immediately stuffed the food in his mouth. Haro, while looking at the scene, was thinking ‘That…’ and silently whispered to Yatori.

“…Since yesterday I thought I saw you bring stuff back to the dorm in small bags… was that for Ikta-san? Did you predict that he would be released today with an empty stomach…?”

“I just wanted to eat it later myself, don’t think too highly of me, Haro.”

While saying so, Yatori gently pinched Haro’s nose with her fingers. Overhearing this conversation, Torway gazed at Yatori with a difficult expression, but as expected the person herself did not notice.

In the meanwhile, Ikta emptied the sack’s content without even leaving crumbs, then, as a totally different person from just a few minutes ago, he energetically stood up.

“Great~! Ikta has successfully revived! …huh? What’s this? Who played shoji?”

He saw the chessboard laid on the table and walked to it. After sitting on a nearby chair and analyzing the board for one second, he lifted his face with a confused look.

“…I say, who played this match? Even the Matthew I met for the first time didn’t lose so badly.”

“Why are you using me as a comparison in this situation!”

“Hahaha… Ikkun, the ones who played this game were me and Dekkun.”

Torway already gave a nickname to his opponent.

Hearing that, Ikta tilted his head.

“Dekku? ….. Dekkun…Dekkun… incompetent… oh I see, it’s the guy at the welcome

party that got trashed by Yatori. The guy with no equal in both body and voice volume.”

Tl note: Ikta start with でくん(katakana), moves to でくん(hiragana), and then デクの棒 (short stick/useless)

“You got to the right answer through rude associations… please at least revise the part of him getting trashed.”

“The one who kicked away Ikta-san was also Warrant Officer Deinkun… yeah~ his shoji skills are weak to a surprising point, at that level even me who is the weakest in the order of knights would be able to easily win.”

Haro innocently spoke overly inconsiderate worlds. Hearing that, Ikta waved at Torway, had him sit across the table and made him recreate every move of the duel.

The princess, watching the discussion between the two, asked a question she just thought of.

“Speaking of it, who is stronger?”

“Eh?” “What?”

“So, ah, I mean in shoji skills. I often played shogi against Yatori and Torway and know their strength are on par with each other, but I don’t know where on the scale I should place Sorlok. You rarely play against Yatori or Torway and even when you do, you leave halfway through, no?”

And when you play against me you’re even meaner… the princess resentfully added. That known rascal, putting in effort only when he wants to tease the princess, brazenly shrugged.

“…So you want me to compete with Torway here and now?”

“Eh…”

“That would be good too. We have enough time for another game…. no, if we get a winner with faster pace, we can have the winner play against Yatori at the second game.”

The princess’ half-joking half-serious expression shook the three… even if it was only shoji, the result of the match could still indicate to some degree their true strength.

There was no harm in letting them fight.

“Although I don’t intend to order you, but you have no reason to refuse right, Sorlok?”

The princess said so with pungent words… during the fight between Yatori and Deinkun, Ikta once said: the successor to the leading old warlord families, Yatorishino Igsem is willing to protect the third princess because she strongly believes Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik will, as a royal, walk on the right path in life.

If Yatori was like this, then Torway who was also born from the ‘Loyal Triad’ should be the same. In other word if she kept being a royal with decency, both Yatori and Torway will be reliable allies.

…However what would happen in the opposite were to happen? If the day the secrets she is now holding dear in her heart were to come to light, what would the development that

comes after that be…?

Honestly, to her Highness the Princess, this was an inauspicious future she didn't want to think about. However, she cannot run away from her own imagination. After all the one who asked her whether she was mentally prepared was none other than Ikta.

— Do you have the determination to keep fighting even if Yatori and Torway were to turn into enemies?

Her Highness Chamille finally understood the meaning. At that time, she just received it as question, but that was also Ikta's way of persuading—implying that 'it would be smart not to do that'.

"Ikta Sorlok, Torway Remeon, Yatorishino Igsem—the ranking of you three is something I am most interested in. Even if it is just skills in shoji."

Simultaneously the three parties felt the air had changed—this was not a situation they could get out with jokes. The princess was asking them to compete at their full strength thus clearly establishing a ranking.

"If her highness desires so."

Without hesitation, the first to answer was Yatori… On the other hand, Matthew and Haro who were observing from the sides finally caught on the tense air.

"…Eh…That… W-we were talking about shoji right? When did it become like this…?"

"Don't ask me, I don't understand either… but… damn it…"

Haro was just feeling confused but Matthew was biting his lips out of frustration… The names listed by her highness Chamille did not include his own, this fact made him so angry he could start screaming.

"…But…That…I…."

"Don't wanna."

When Torway was having a hard time finding words to say, Ikta already firmly declined.

The princess stared at him with a disappointed face as he got up, like he didn't have anything to do there anymore.

"Say your reasons, Sorlok."

"If I must say it– it's because my value is the opposite of what the princess wants."

"I will think you are just afraid to accept a serious match."

"Think it as you want, since the beginning I didn't have any reputation to lose."

Ikta after nonchalantly replying decided to leave, her Highness the Princess with voice filled with anger shouted at his back:

"Now I understand–the one who is not mentally prepared is not me, it's you!"

"Correct, I will draw you a flower circle princess."

Before the retreating figure disappeared at the corner, her highness Chamille turned away and left with violent steps.

***

Kanna was forcing her legs forward step by step on the graveled road while thinking the goods in the cart today were especially heavy.

The whole platoon, including her, was dispatched to ferry the goods. To be more accurate, it was to transport the supplies, including food and other necessities, from the nearest city two hours away back to the base.

Since it would be a waste to bring an empty cart to the city, as there is stuff that are more easily processed there than at the base such as damaged pots, knives, shoes and so on, they had to carry these objects. This would obliviously be cause of substantial weights, but today, Kanna felt the weight bothered her body way more than usual.

"Ah… so tired… those cavalry units have it so good…"

To the four-man groups, responsible in pulling the carts, the figures of horse riding soldiers in front of them would involuntary generate feelings of envy.

The one leading in front of the cavalry ranks, with crimson hair on the winds and far looking eyes, was Warrant Officer Yatorishino.

But all responsibilities of this transporting goods mission falls on the one next to her, clutching to the horse, a slim man with poor complexion– aide to the supreme commander of the northern region, Major Yuskushiram Taekk.

"You must feel bored in this kind of mission, Warrant Officer Yatorishino. Cough…"

Major Taekk, who gets a coughing attack whenever he relaxes, said so.

"Not at all sir, because I understand the importance of escorting."

Yatori honestly replied.

Although there were also horses behind the ranks, those were ‘workhorse’ pulling cargo carts or have goods strapped to their bodies, in contrast to the much lighter weighted ‘war horses’ Yatori and others were on.

“Instead, I was taken aback that a high ranked official such as yourself, Major, is personally participating these transport missions. Your careful supervision will be very helpful to me, as I lack the geographic knowledge pertaining this area.”

“Supervising you…? Well, there was also that reason. Yeah… Cough cough…”

In addition to ferrying goods, there were other matters that had to be personally handled by the Major– even if Yatori was aware of this, she understanding her position, did not inquire further. Having said that, she could still vaguely guess the reason.

“I would advise youngsters with bright future like you not to be obsessed with tactics and strategies, instead start learning right now military management… you should do so especially in peacetimes when you are unable to make use of war to climb.”

Major Taekk spontaneously said those words with a tired and self-deprecating tone…

So it really was that? Yatori could also understand. On borders such as this, you wouldn’t be able to maintain a military organization without painstaking efforts.

“To you who has already been in central and the eastern region, the northern base must look like a doghouse… leaving central aside, even comparing to the eastern garrison bordering Kioka, the north lacks severely on soldiers, because of that our fort would naturally have poorer appearances, of course there are also other reasons.”

When the major finished speaking, he moved his gaze sideway to have a look at Yatori. She also returned his gauging stare.

“It’s because of supply problems that you can’t establish a large-scale stronghold right? If you were to set a base capable of accommodating massive numbers of soldiers, then the cost of maintaining such huge operation would befall on nearby populace… the result will be feeding the soldiers but starve the people scenario. So the only option was to spread the combat power, knowing the risks associated with it, and build multiple small-scale bases.”

“…Yes, that’s it. An army, with the populace as the enemy does not have a future. This is not just some idealistic talks, it’s simply that when they no longer harvest grain, we too will starve. If you look at it in a straightforward way we must accommodate to the populace in order to survive, the so called army is just such a thing… cough, cough, how is it? Are you youngsters full of dreams disappointed by the reality?”

Major Taekk asked with an anguished expression, but contrary to his expectation Yatori shook her head with a hearty expression instead.

“Precisely because the army was originally this kind of thing, so the current condition is just a reflection of reality. War exist so we can obtain peace, thus we can’t allow the peace be dragged down by war.”

Looking like he was admiring at Yatori who had finished speaking, major Taekk emotionally nodded.

“If you were not bluffing when you said those words, then you would be a good soldier no

matter the times you are in.”

“The times?”

“Cough, Cough. Yes, no matter how famous the general, whether you can experience war in your lifetime depends purely on luck. Many are the aging soldiers without any warfare experience. To tell the truth, even here we have them… but let’s not discuss whether that’s lucky or not.”

“No, I don’t think there’s a need for a discussion, it certainly is lucky. From another standpoint having few war veterans means results of the northern garrison in keeping peace for many years, becoming an inhibiting force.”

“…You really are frank with your words, Warrant Officer Yatorishino. Are you like this to all your superiors?”

“If I had said something inappropriate, please do forgive me.”

“No, to tell you the truth I feel refreshed… it’s rare to hear praises from youngsters, it even reignited some of my motivation. Although I can only teach you the military behavior in peacetime, but this and the soldiers lacking a sense of crisis, even if they perform similar actions, their condition is totally different… Cough… Cough Cough…”

A pained smile emerged on major Taekk’s thin face, Yatori too nodded solemnly to him as reply.

***

The place to supply the materials was a small town built around an oasis. Throughout the dry lands of the north only this area had enough nourishment allowing people to cultivate a variety of crops, led by wheat.

“Fi-Finally arrived.”

Reaching the gathering point, Kanna, exhausted, slumped on the ground.

Equality of the sexes was considered important in Katjvanmaninik’s army, but when it comes to pulling heavy weights, no matter what, differences in muscles between males and females in the ‘amount of stamina’ are oblivious.

Seeing the males with burly physiques were still left with a margin made Kanna somewhat dissatisfied. In order recover some of her stamina, she moved to rest under the shade of a nearby tree.

“Uah… We arrived already?”

She just found a black haired youth poking his head out of the clothed cart, the youth immediately moved, before any soldier could spot him, to the shade of the tree which was a dead corner to the eyes of the others, arriving right in front of Kanna.

“Huh… Ahh…AHHHH! You…You are officer Ikkun–Gah!”

When Kanna had just opened her mouth with surprise, Ikta already sealed her lips with his

fingers.

“Haa~! Be quiet. You’re prohibited from emitting loud noises. Because Yatori and Major Taekk are still over there.”

“Uh…Yesh~!”

“Anyway, good afternoon Kanna. Your ribbon strapped ponytail is very attractive today as well… Hm it seems the people that would notice me are all gone, good.”

After estimating that Yatori and Major Taekk should have turned the corner, Ikta finally released Kanna’s mouth. She held her lips with her own hands while staring at the youth with teary eyes.

“You were hidden on the cart this whole time…? No wonder it felt extremely heavy today!”

“It’s not like that, you guys were the ones who moved the cart I was using as napping place in the first place. No wonder I felt rocking to and fro all the time.”

“Liar! When you just came out, didn’t you say ‘arrived already’?”

“It may be an auditory hallucination caused by dehydration. Poor girl, you should always make sure to be well hydrated.”

While Ikta shamelessly said those words playing the fool, at the same time he stretched his hand and pulled up Kanna leading her away.

“W-Wait a moment, where are we going? I must wait here…”

“You just had to wait there right? Just the delivery of the stuff alone would take around one hour, then don’t you think we should effectively make use of the extra time, after all we finally came to town.”

Facing the elated Ikta walking in front of her, Kanna couldn’t find within herself the will to refuse him.

At that precise moment, she was already playing on the palm of his hand as he obtained dominance.

“Anyway, I feel thirsty, let’s go get something to drink. ”

“I-I didn’t bring money, if it’s water we can just go back to the troops…”

Kanna tried to make Ikta go back, but Ikta ignored her strategy as if he didn’t hear it. He reached out to one of the nearby houses and lightly knocked on the window, with a surprised face a middle aged woman leant out from the window.

“…Who are ya?”

The woman stared out with intimidating air but Ikta without faltering bowed.

“Good afternoon, beautiful Onee-san, although presumptuous, we are a little thirsty–”

The middle aged woman started listening with a serious expression to Ikta, who came asking for water with exaggerated movements, but without knowing the reason, as time went, her face softened.

The reason lies within Ikta's furious offensive of glib praises that would make a hardened man embarrassed.

After a few minutes of conversation, the woman said 'wait a bit' and moved back in the house, after a while she came back with two thumb thick, long stem of something that looked like vegetable. Ikta received that with a full face smile, lightly kissed on the back of the woman's hand and came back to Kanna.

"Kanna, look, look. I got sugarcanes from that beautiful woman. She also told me the directions to the well, let's chew on this while we go look for that."

Tl note: sugarcanes are chewed for their sweet taste in Asian countries, also brown sugar is extracted from them. Image

"…. is that so, officer Ikkun? Don't tell me you are one of those so called playboy?"

"That's a misconception, instead it's me who has been captivated by all older women in the world."

While receiving the sugarcane, she though this person's quibbles were amazing.

This thing needed you to remove its hard outer bark before it could be consumed thus the two started doing so while walking forward.

"That woman didn't mind my military outfit even after seeing it. The residents here do not hate soldiers nor excessively fear them."

"Huh? Ah… yes, because this is an important supply point, so no matter which side, both desires friendly relationships…"

"To accomplish that, the military assumed a low profile as last resort. Is this Lieutenant General Safida's ploy?"

Ikta bit into the sugarcane after removing the outer layer and asked the question while savoring the overflowing sweetness.

"Instead of it being Lieutenant General Safida's ploy… I would say it is something Major Taekk planned. Because Lieutenant General threw all managerial and operational responsibilities to him."

Kanna answered with dismissive actions. After thinking for a while, Ikta also nodded in understanding.

"So the leader is just decorations? After all, only the position of the supreme commander of the norther garrison could have been obtained on connections with nobles alone."

In the Katjvanmaninik empire, the military officer 'soldiers' and the administrative officer 'nobles' are separated fields. Although there are few exceptions like knights, but the reality of soldiers controlling the nobles could never happen, so is vice versa. Not letting military and politics getting entangles, instead leaving each field to their respective experts, that was the correct legacy left us by the 'loyal triad'.

"Getting the position of a high ranked official without any real accomplishment. Even if they fully implemented the practice of meritocracy in the imperial army to avoid such situation, those bad habits are still really hard to eradicate. The position of the supreme

commander of the northern garrison must be the most overblown of such case."

Lieutenant Safida was not born a noble, but the Safida family had a long history of being close to those in power. Therefore, the nobles came up with all kinds of ideas to help a person like him.

Of course the military felt disgusted by that. It would be a different matter if the person was actually capable, but the military of course didn't want to leave a high ranking position to someone lacking.

However, they couldn't ignore the noble's pressure too– in such dilemma they found a compromise, and that was to entrust the actual duty of managing the garrison to reliable aides with robust capabilities.

"So you mean the aide chosen was Major Taekk. The lieutenant general is a decoration and the Major is his watchdog?"

"This is a matter every soldier knows. The Lieutenant General just stays in the commander's room with a self-important look, in fact almost all the instructions come from Major Taekk's orders…. ah, but there is one exception."

"Exception?"

"Yes. Only the matters concerning the Shinaak tribe go through Lieutenant General Safida directly. It hasn't happened lately, but setting up the punitive units was such an example… also the Lieutenant General is the kind who likes to steal all credits so he often goes personally to the frontlines."

"So he likes war more than peace? Well those kind of people aren't rare among soldiers."

"Instead of saying Lieutenant General likes wars… I think it may be because he hates the Shinaak tribe? That's what I feel seeing his everyday demeanor."

Hearing Kanna's words an image popped in Ikta's mind… the spirits packed like canned sardines in that dark cell. Those should be something the Lieutenant General took from the Shinaak tribe.

"If he understands he has been put in an empty, useless position, the oppression against the Shinaak tribe may in the end just be a way to release his anger… no matter what he is still a superior, and Major Taekk couldn't do anything but comply."

Ikta frowned with an unhappy expression while chewing on the sugarcane.

When he was just about to finish consuming the almost twenty centimeters long sugarcane, they arrived to the public well they were looking for.

It was a small well with two rope bound buckets nearby.

"Forget it, that doesn't concern us. Since this is a rare occasion, let's talk about something more interesting."

Ikta changed the topic while pulling up the bucket he threw in with the rope and pulley. In front of him, Kanna, doing the same action, faced Ikta with a question, just like what the other wanted.

"…Then, may I ask you a question officer Ikkun?"

“Sure, a side note, the right side of my bed is still empty today.”

“B-Bed…? N-No it’s not about that… that, can you tell me what is ‘Science’?”

Kanna asked, remembering the first page of that book. Ikta answered without stopping his hands pulling on the ropes.

“For example this well– it is the product of human intellect right? With this they could get the water needed for a living without going to faraway river or lakes. Another example is this pulley– the design stabilizes the rope that pass through it so the water in the bucket will not splash out when you finally draw it out. Whichever, they are objects that makes life easier.”

“Oh…it certainly is so.”

“But, inventions such as this are not something that just appears one day, there are three indispensable conditions. The first is laziness, the natural feeling you get when you are given hard work. The second is awareness– the ability to understand which part of work is most tiresome. The third condition is the creativity to combine the first two requirements.”

“Creativity…”

“I want to find a way to be lazy at work; but if I were lazy, in some part the work will have problems; then how should I take care of that part– this kind of thought process leads people to invent. Then one invention will become the source of another. Like the well that came first brought the invention of the pulley which makes getting the water easier. Arranging in order the various inventions and the indispensable know how that comes with them, that is called systematic recording… phew!”

Ikta after moving the bucket from the well, lifted it with both hands and poured the content into his mouth. After repeating this action three more times and making sure his dry throat got enough moisture, he turned back to face Kanna.

“The blend of reasonable but easily understood systematic information which will become the knowledge spring, a foundation for the next invention– this is the so called science. If you are personally involved in the systemization of information, then you are practicing science. Do you understand what I’m saying Kanna?”

“…I only have a general understanding. The thinking of not monopolizing the invention and the know-how, instead share these resources in a public pool, thus springing the next invention… it this right? ”

Without any confidence, Kanna said those words, but after hearing them, Ikta grabbed her hand with a face full of smile.

“It’s exactly as you say! Furthermore, the understanding of the subject you have just displayed, it’s the condition that is most required when practicing science. You are amazing, Kanna, you have an innate talent for science!”

“Y-You are exaggerating… I don’t have any talent at all…”

“No, I’m sure you have it. Because you are my junior apprentice, how can my junior lack in talent.”

I don’t remember being your junior… Kanna couldn’t speak out these thoughts after

seeing his pure smile. Ikta made use of Kanna's kindness and proceeded speaking:

"Oh right, I also have something I want to ask you, it's the conversation that was interrupted last time. I say, after reading that book, which part of the Alderah Church you find interesting?"

That book– the book that inconceivably knotted the fate of a High Grade Military Officer Cadet to that of a soldier, written by Anarai Khan, the <Records of Grand Arfatra>. Kanna while recalling its content, started answering:

"Uh, that book mentioned a lot of differences between the spirit beliefs of the Shinaak tribe and the Alderah faith…"

The Shinaak tribe have a different religion from the empire's 'Alderah Church', it's called 'Spirit faith'. An attentive analysis of such religion was one of Anarai Khan's most focused theme.

"Hm."

"Although the narrative was also very interesting… but since long ago I had questions regarding the part about the origin."

"Origin… what do you mean?"

Seeing Ikta is looking at her with probing eyes, Kanna desperately tried to find the appropriate words.

"…Because, don't you find it weird after thinking about it? When the Shinaak tribe refers to the spirits, they do not take 'God's* existence' as prerequisite. However, to our knowledge, the so called four great spirits are messengers sent on earth by our great lord… Uh… so…"

*Tl note: God written as main god, read as Alderamin.

"What you mean is… when you want to discuss the existence of spirits, you have to have the premise of God right?"

"Uh… Um… yeah, something like that. To our understanding a faith that worship spirits but do not have beliefs in God is something extremely weird. Like a situation with only fish but no sea nor rivers."

Reaching this point, Kanna stopped for a while, then with troubled expression continued:

"But after thinking about it I suddenly realized… which side is the truly weird one?"

"…Which side is the truly weird one?"

"Because if you believe in this book, that Shinaak tribe's spirit faith can exist without any correlation with God. If the theory we discussed earlier was correct, then such situation shouldn't happen."

"……"

"Thus… I think, shouldn't it be our common sense the subjects we have to suspect? The way of thinking 'Because of God, Spirits exists', couldn't that be wrong from the beginning? Because in truth the spirits themselves never told us: 'Believe in God', did

they?”

Kanna unconsciously said something that would probably make people faint if heard by Alderah devotees.

“It was also written in the book that our Alderah beliefs and their Spirits beliefs content are completely different. After all, the backbone of the Alderah faith is that believers must abide by the rules set by our great God. Like how we have to do this, we mustn’t do that or something we have to restrain ourselves about…”

“What you are talking about is ‘religious laws’, that is the term from the book.”

“Ah…yes, it’s that. In contrast in Shinaak tribe’s spirit belief there are no such pyramidal organization…so…in other words… it is….”

“Kanna, don’t be so agitated. You can slowly choose words to say and explain things one by one.”

Ikta with a calming tone told Kanna who couldn’t finish her sentences because of how anxious she was. After calming down, she took in a deep breath before continuing:

“…in Shinaak tribe’s spirit belief there are no such pyramidal organization. Instead they just simply show gratefulness toward the four great spirits who are considered ‘Love of the World’ and do various rituals to show gratitude, only those… as for laws dictating what or what not to do, it seems those are decided by the chief and the council… and has nothing to do with spirits.”

Without noticing Ikta’s eyes, which were looking more surprised as time passes, Kanna concluded her argument:

“If it is as that book says, the Alderah faith and the spirits faith are two completely different things… then at the same time God and the four great spirits are different existences…in addition of them being messengers of God, the true identity of these children may also be completely different? This is what I think.”

Kanna finished expressing herself while petting the partner at her waist. She was feeling uneasy as she didn’t know if she conveyed her thoughts, but that was an unnecessary worry.

“The spirits will never tell us to believe in God, this is what you mean right? Kanna.”

Ikta’s voice was trembling. He slowly reached out with his hands and placed them on Kanna’s palm.

“…You really are great. You dispelled God’s curse, Kanna. And you did it almost completely by yourself!”

“G-God’s curse?”

“This curse is the crucial difference that separates Science from Theology. Stubbornly denying truth that does not comply with God’s will, while only making use of those favorable to god… their paranoia distorted the truth. Obliviously if they are not able to throw away such indoctrination, humanity will never be able to step forward on the road of science!”

Finishing speaking, Ikta didn’t bother with the surrounding gazes anymore and started dancing while holding Kanna’s hands.

“You are right Kanna! If there truly is a supreme God, then his first words would have been ordering us to ‘be lazy’! All other God’s commands are all fakes! Ideology that should be thrown away, made by those in power!”

“Huh…officer Ikkun…? I-I didn’t say so mu–”

In the state he is now, these words didn’t enter Ikta’s ear. He continued dancing happily like he is converting his present feelings into movements, producing a messy, creative and unrestrained dance.

Kanna couldn’t do anything but follow him… however she found out that being together with the youth in front of her was not a cause of trouble for her.

–Ah, so this Nii-chan is a lot more childish than what he appears to be.

Kanna Temari intuitively comprehended that… the carefree boy in front of him must have been using this method to seduce others. Getting people to participate in science, lazing around in the right way–this behavior to lure others into depravation, it must be his way of showing affection.

–Science is really fun you know, so Kanna you should join too.

The kid who invited the one he liked to participate in this special game. After wiping away the simple tricks he shows on the surface, Ikta’s loving nature could be encompassed with one sentence. Many people, after noticing his true nature of naivety and innocence, hidden beneath the mischievous mask…will find themselves unable to have anything but good impressions about him.

“…Haha, Ikkun sure is a weird person.”

When that incredible feeling diffused in her chest, she found it natural to omit the honorifics in addressing him. The one in front of her right now, is but a two years’ younger teenager worth caring about.

They originally thought the time seemed to go on forever, but a sudden scream brought it to an end. The youth’s smile dispersed. It was followed by a roar that reverberated in the area coupled with sharp sounds of swords clashing.

“…? W-What was that just then? Did something happen over there…?”

Kanna moved her gaze to the direction the sounds came from, Ikta also, with a stiff face, looked at the same place.

“…It seems so. Do you know what is located over there?”

“Uh… I remember that at the end of this road there is the building used by those in power to hold meetings… ah!”

“Sorry, let’s separate here. You hurry back to where the rest of the troops are.”

Ikta did not wait for Kanna to finish her explanation, separated the hands that were previously tied together, and started running. Kanna couldn’t catch up with the disappearing figure and could only send him away with her gaze.

The residual body temperature left in her hands slowly dispersed making her feel reluctant to let it go.

***

Going back just five minutes from when Ikta started running.

“You can stop here. It’s rare to be in town, until the meeting is over go find somewhere you like to relax… Cough, cough.”

After arriving in front of an especially big building, Major with these words refused Yatori who wished to stay together. Having said that, he was not going to go alone as he brought four subordinates.

However, standing with these big, burly, sturdy figures, it was Major Taekk as superior who looked lacking in spirit.

“Then I will wait outside.”

Thus Yatori stood upright on the doorway. Of course she decided to keep that same position till the meeting is over.

I clearly said she could do whatever she wanted… seeing Yatori’s strong sense of duty, the Major couldn’t help but smile wryly.

“It seems necessary to order you to go relax your body a bit, warrant officer Yatorishino.”

“Yes sir, I will also comply to that order.”

Yatori took out her partner Shia from her waist bag, only to see many squared ‘wings’ reaching out from his back. After absorbing the shining bright sunlight, the usually sullen faced Shia also had upturned eyes showing satisfaction.

“Sir, the only one this subordinate have that could stretch ‘wings’ is this.”

Tl note: in Japanese the major said relax but read as stretch your wings.

“The reasons your seriousness doesn’t make the atmosphere heavy must be thanks to this humor… do as you wish.”

Major Taekk turned away and walked forward. It seems she is different from her father– that was the Major’s thought about Yatori. If it was that person, he wouldn’t leave room for interpretation to orders. No matter if he was in the position of giving or receiving orders, that famous general would still adhere in being the incarnation of discipline.

To tell the truth, Major Taekk didn’t like paying attention to youngsters.

Almost every year High Grade Military Officer Cadets will flock to his side, and go back after learning seven tenths of boredom, two tenths of disillusionment and one tenths of actual military knowledge.

No matter how hard work it is to run military units at borders, to those elites, the northern territory is but a simple stepping stone, some place they wish to go through as soon as

possible.

Major Taekk could understand very well their feelings, because he himself was once one of those.

Around twenty years ago, Major Taekk was also a High Grade Military Officer cadet. After finishing the High Grade Academy, directly passed the High Grade Military Exam, with a heart filled of loyalty and ambitions, a young man who had just started the life journey of a soldier.

From the results, he had long deviated from the road of success. Although major Taekk is currently forty-six years old, it is essentially impossible to climb further in rank in the lifetime he has left. The aide to the supreme commander of the norther region is just such a position. Having mixed feelings of admiration and envy when seeing youngsters with bright futures is just an inevitable reaction.

Major Taekk's current status is to be a substitute to the supreme commander who obtained his position through noble's support and with no actual strength, while resolving the financial troubles and the populace's doubts, he also had to properly manage the garrison.

–If it wasn't for this, he would have long retired and started his life anew.

Furthermore, when he recalled how he suffered from the chronic lung disease, Major Taekk could only sigh. That was also one of the reasons that deviated him from the road of success. The disease was not advancing, nor there was the possibility of curing it completely, the symptoms just grow with age. For how many years more could he keep lying about his physical condition and keep working?

–It's only, well no matter. If there is something that could become a role model for the younger generations, then there would still be a value in forcing himself to keep at it.

Being proud of his lack in combat experience, thinking that as the result of maintaining peace in the northern region– thinking back of Warrant Officer Yatorishino who indirectly praised him made major Taekk smile unconsciously.

"How come today's welcoming hasn't come yet?" his subordinate interrupted his thoughts in an unhappy voice. After passing through the gates and entering the inner building, they were left foolishly waiting at the entrance and no answer came even after their repeated calls. The major also felt it was natural his subordinate was irritated.

"Maybe they had some urgent matters and couldn't leave. But we came here out of our own volition… we don't have to wait here at the entrance like idiots."

After the major finished saying so, he led the way to the inner side of the building. Since he already memorized the planimetry in his previous visits, without hesitation he walked to the big room situated ahead of them. He thought they would be stopped midway by someone, but that didn't happen.

After walking for twenty seconds, the group arrived at their objective.

"I beg pardon for my rudeness, I am Yuskushiram Taekk coming from the base in stead of the supreme commander–"

Major Taekk had just walked into the room greeting whoever was inside but after a

second, stench of blood filled his nostrils making him stop his feet out of caution.

In front of him was the body of a sturdy man collapsed on the big table placed in the center of the room. You could tell he was dead at first glance, because he had a deep wound going from head to the spine.

“…Immediately retreat to the outside!”

From someone who hasn’t stood in battle for long times, Major Taekk’s judgement could be thought as fast and correct. But his choice was to ‘backtrack’, it was also the most oblivious choice, to some extent this action was also predicted by the enemy.

The major and his men tried to run back the corridor together, however the assassins appeared one after another in front of them from the shadows. Half of them were wielding half-length air guns suitable for indoor uses; the other half had a unique ‘〈 shaped’ knife weapon at their side. There were even those with blood stains, probably the result of what happened in that room.

Tl note: see kukri

Although the culprits’ short-sleeved face covering attire was very unique as well, the thing that caught most attention was their skin which was of a darker color than the average empire man. Without doubts, this is proof of living on the faraway highlands closer to the sun, that is people living on the lands of the Grand Arfatra mountain range.

“These guys, they are from Shinaak Tri–”

Before the soldiers could react, the air gun armed intruders fired a flurry of bullets. Then while taking advantage of the retreating soldiers, the gunners are switched with swordsmen which rushed forward to slash.

“Whoa–” “Gaah!” “Wuu…!”

The Shinaak warriors used the blade called Kukri knife to cut their prey’s arms, slash the body and decapitate– Major Taekk originally brought four men but in just a dozen seconds they all left this world.

“…Failed…”

Although he survived because he was surrounded by his subordinates, the major still took two bullets to the chest. The already chronic diseased lungs, after being pierced by bullets are wailing in pain.

“Wuh…!”

The impulse to cough came mixed with blood. Instead he resisted the urge and swallowed, with trembling arms took out a sword from his military uniform.

“Hm…! What is wrong with you! Are you scared?”

Perhaps overwhelmed by the dying struggle, or maybe they felt repulsed from killing the diseased, Shinaak tribe intruders hesitated in giving him the final blow. But when major Taekk raised his blade trying to cut the enemy, in that instant one air gunner with raised gun in the back cleared his doubts.

First the blade fell on the ground, then strength left his legs, finally his whole body fell.

The third bulled reached just above the heart. The diseased lungs also seemed to have given up, stopping the wailing, even coughing up blood was too much effort.

–Is it going to end like this? At least I'm not falling to the disease, is that considered a consolation…?

An intruder armed with kukri knife came close to the body of the major on the ground. He could still feel the movements. Although he was striving to at least cut his opponent once, but no matter how hard he tried, not a single finger moved.

He sure enough was still feeling regret. In the end even though so many years had passed, he still felt motivated by the youngsters' excitement…

While quickly losing consciousness due to the large blood loss… Major Taekk felt like hearing somebody kicking open the front door and rushing like wind with heroic footsteps.

***

When she heard sounds of fighting, without hesitation, Yatori rushed into the building, after running at full speed to the location she felt the presence came from, she was immediately presented with that scene.

"Major–!"

The first thing that caught her eyes was the superior's body in a pool of blood. When Yatori arrived, Major Taekk was receiving the fatal blow.

The 〈 shaped knife was extracted from his ribs, spraying fresh blood. The intruders caught in the blood are observing with sharp eyes the prey that had just appeared.

Even when facing many, Yatori advanced without hesitation– if you wanted to act, it was obliviously the best if you had the first move. And if you want to reach the enemies, then it would be too slow to start moving after readying your swords.

The conclusion she arrived at was– readying her swords and slashing while closing in to the enemy…!

The blades arrived at their target two breaths before what the enemy had expected. Yatori's attack bypassed the sword the enemy raised to parry, and laterally swept through his neck. Huge amount of blood gushed out from the severed carotid– she who continued her attack, used her short sword to stab at his heart. The body of the enemy who originally intended to resist, lost all strength in an instant.

Seeing their companion’s death, the intruders sought revenge by attacking Yatori, and she

replied accordingly. After turning her body, the two swords engaged the enemy while avoiding their attacks, catching a moment of vulnerability caused by the confusion of the battle, the sharp blades performed a counterattack.

The air-gunners in the back of course hesitated to shoot at this target who was constantly moving between comrades and couldn't be aimed at.

The enemy leader, noticing the current situation was far from good, ordered his companions to temporally get some distance from the foe. The bullets came at the same time from the openings created, but Yatori calmly used the corpse of the man she took down at the beginning as a shield.

Normal air guns are not equipped with such power to perforate a human body.

The status quo fell into a stalemate with the parties staring at each other… however, this was a beneficial development for Yatori. Since they had been making such ruckus, her companions, noticing the disturbance would reach there sooner or later. That way the side with superior numbers will be hers while the enemy would become the minority, then with smooth actions they could capture them all alive.

"…Let's retreat. We have archived our goal already."

However, it appeared that the enemy understood the situation as well. It was as if the man who looked like their leader could tone down his emotions, and managed to give order to his companions with blood-shot eyes full of revenge.

The companions made protest with their eyes but the leader shook his head and spoke a decisive statement.

"Did you forget chief Nanak's orders?… Before the holy war, do not risk. Retreat!"

It began after the order, the intruders one after another disappeared in the opposite direction Yatori was. They intended to use the back door or the windows, anyway sought an escape route diverse from the front door.

Even if it was Yatori, she wouldn't rush to give chase alone. She first put the body of the intruder she used as a shield on the ground, then rushed to Major Taekk's side, stretched her arm toward the neck and made sure there were no pulse anymore.

The sorrowful look on her face lasted only an instant, she then immediately stood straight and made a salute to the departed. Mourning the man who even at the end didn't receive any return from his lifetime achievements, and his military spirit that even at death didn't allow him to let go of his military knife.

"…. Please leave the rest to me, Major Taekk– I will now continue pursue the enemy!"

Yatori after firmly stating so, turned away and ran straight for the door, rushed out of the building without hesitation.

***

As if changing shifts, when the girl had just rushed out of the door, a young man slipped in

from a window on the corridor, at the sight of the six bodies lying in the corridor–Ikta Sorlok snorted with a ‘Whoa’ sound.

“What is this? Almost all of them are empire military, is this the work of those who just ran away?”

“Please be careful, Ikta. Enemies may still be inside.”

Ikta, while listening to Kusu’s advices, at the same time checked every single room within the building.

A male who looked like the owner in the conference room, five females who looked like maids in the next room, also an old couple at the corner of the stairway leading to the second floor, all these people were leaking blood from the head or chest and were already deceased.

“On the first floor*, five men from the empire’s military and a Shinaak Tribe man who should be with the culprits. Just looking around I found fourteen bodies… the inhabitants of this house were all massacred.”

*Tl note: or ground floor depending on where you live

After getting a gist of this tragedy, Ikta crooked his head as if there was something wrong.

“But, it’s really weird. From the state of the drying blood… the death time of the family members should have been much earlier that the military’s downstairs.”

Speaking of which, the intruders were able to kill everyone in this house without the neighbors noticing. Ikta thought the other party had to be really agile, furthermore he hadn’t seen any trace of plundering on valuables, with these observation, the chances of it being thieves aiming for money was really low.

“…Although with crimes committed by the Shinaak Tribe are not uncommon in this area, it’s hard to believe that the attack just had to happen when Major Taekk was visiting and is a pure coincidence. Adding to the fact that the perpetrators didn’t plunder the house and left it as is, if I wanted to speculate on their reasons–”

Ikta arrived at this conclusion that the most likely case was the Major got ambushed. If it really was so, then this would be a planned crime… No, it should be called strategy.

Ikta while confirming his deduction walked through one room to another. Thus he discovered a mysterious item in the next room that looked like a guest room.

All around the room were thrown away white, a little dirty, cloth-like materials.

“What is this? They are too small to be curtains… Ah, there is a hole just big enough for the head, meaning this is clothing?”

“Ikta, aren’t those pilgrimage clothing of the Alderah Church?”

Hearing Kusu’s reminder, the young man exclaimed in understanding.

The devout believers of the Alderah faith would walk across the mainland all around seeking for temples to accumulate virtue, and this was something that must be worn during their travels. It could also be called an easy version of priest vestments.

However, understanding what this really was made Ikta even more puzzled. It would be another matter if this was a clergy school dormitory, but why would there be this many pilgrimage clothing thrown on the floor here? Even him and Kusu couldn't explain the reasons.

Just when the young man was immersed in thought to find something to aid in his deduction, suddenly a high pitched scream came from downstairs. It should have been someone who came because of the disturbance and found the macabre spectacle downstairs right?

Feeling someone moving closer, Kusu worryingly pulled its master's sleeve from the waist pocket.

"Ikta, shouldn't we run away now? In here, regardless of who sees us it will be hard to explain."

"Yeah, let's run. The current situation is not one I should be thrown in the brig again."

After Ikta nodded with a serious expression, he stepped on the nearest windows and nimbly jumped down.

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The wind mixed with dust hit on her cheeks.

Faster and faster, accelerate more and more making the field of vision narrow, slapping the beloved horse's side to make it give it's all.

"Don't let them run away…!"

The horsemen were the same.

Yatori who was straddled on the horse with a leaning forward position, put in more strength into the hands holding the reins. Leading the cavalry unit behind, she stared at the back of the intruders in front of her.

After confirming Major Taekk's death and rushing out of the building, Yatori left the job of preserving the crime scene and reporting to HQ to her subordinates, she herself took command and mobilized the cavalry unit in pursuit of the fleeing enemies. Compared to the peas sized figures they were chasing twenty minutes ago, the distance between the two sides has now been greatly shortened.

"No, do not slow down! The moment they get to the mountain it's over!"

The condition of the road below was obliviously bad to the point to be impossible to rectify. If you wanted to avoid the horses tripping over the rocks, while at the same time keep rushing forward with that kind of speed, you would need extraordinary skills and guts. Even among the veteran cavalry unit whom should have already accumulated plenty of experiences, there were those who lagged behind.

However, Yatori thought– If we are not keeping this speed, the distance wouldn't shorten at all!

“Everybody, raise your long-ranged weapons! Start a volley aiming for the enemy’s left, after that prepare for melee combat!”

In response to Yatori’s orders, a group of soldiers raised their air guns, the majority however immediately raised the crossbow. The hard to aim shooting while on horseback was just an opening event, the main action was the spear assault after that– numbers of soldiers, quality of the horses, the remaining stamina, all the elements were in our favor. If we further attacked from their weaker side, then without doubts it will become the formula of victory.

Yatori made this judgement with confidence.

However, just as she was about to give the orders to ‘shoot!’, Yatori had to forcibly hold back the voice that almost leaked out. That was because behind the boulders the enemy was running to, a figure flashed by.

“…Guh! Abort the attack! Everybody halt!”

The corner of mind in Yatori’s brain dedicated to commanding always kept its cool, and repels the silly ideas of pushing into enemy ambushes regardless of the risk.

The cavalry unit stopped its advance. Noticing this the enemy also immediately slowed down and stopped, at the same time one after another new foes holding either crossbows or air-guns appeared from behind the rock.

“…So they set an ambush beforehand, the enemy was also quite well prepared.”

Knowing that this plan even took consideration of the case being pursued, made Yatori feel admiration. If they followed them into the rocky area just then, the troops would have been shaken by the surprise, in that situation the flaw would have given the enemy the opportunity to deal a major blow to the main force.

But the reality was that Yatori’s observation and quick decision had effects, her troops stopped before entering the enemy’s effective shooting range. The reason the ambushing units showed themselves should be because they understood they were discovered.

At the foot of the Grand Arfatra Mountains range, the two forces stared at each other from long distances.

“…What can we do, platoon leader? Seeing the enemy numbers, if we charged while they attack, our force should also be prepared to face substantial sacrifices.”

“It is so, Sergeant. Of course I would do it if the case required so but right now it’s not that kind of situation.”

After Yatori nodded in agreement to the adjutant, stared at the enemy group and shouted with all her strength:

“People of Shinaak! Why did you commit the atrocities of killing our comrades! Let me hear your excuses!”

This voice clearly reached the enemies stationed hundreds of meters away. After a little while, the enemy also replied. The surprising fact was the reply also came in a female voice.

“–The pain of your comrade’s death, do you feel it! Do you also feel it, it is painful!”

Compared to the not fluent impression unique to the Shinaak tribe’s dialect, the appearance of the opponent who said those words surprised Yatori even more. Although she couldn’t distinguish her face because of the distances, but without doubts she was a very petite young girl. Right now that young girl was shouting words representing the many Shinaak warriors present there.

“…Those who don’t care for their companions lives, aren’t those considered cold-blooded brutes on the mountains?!”

“You, you are the cold-blooded brutes! If it weren’t so, why did you take away our Hahashik?!”

“…. Hahashik? What are those?!”

“You have it at your side right now! You call them spirits! You took them away from us, if that’s not being cold-blooded brutes then what is?!”

Hearing her refer to something she absolutely had no recollection of made Yatori feel very confused. Even now she was ignorant regarding the repressing policy against the Shinaak tribe set by Lieutenant General Safida, the means employed and the matter regarding the confiscation of the spirits.

“Before that, you also forced us to accept various conditions! First you prohibited us to sell on the plains, then the military forcibly bought at dirty cheap prices our corn! So we could only buy few vegetables and fruits! The corn stock left was also not enough to pass the winter! The elderly, the children, they always, always starved to death!”

“……..”

“Our companion who resorted to stealing as last resort were also killed by you one after another! You then even started to take away our fire and wind Hahashik! Taking away our food, killing our companions, even stealing our very important Hahashik–these kind of actions, if not brutes who would commit them! You tell me!”

Yatori gasped. Even her who was not familiar with the matter could feel the other party’s profound hatred. At the same time, she realized the situation would not be solved with Major Taekk’s death alone.

“…Then, make your request! From the tomorrow’s military, what do you wish for?”

Yatori’s hope of at least leaving a foot for negotiation was completely destroyed by the reply that came.

“Hn! We have no hope for you! Who would expect anything from brutes! …. We just wanted to resume it to the original way! We just wanted to return to the life before you forced us to go farther and farther north, return to the time we could go up the mountains and back to the plains freely, to those days that now makes people nostalgic!”

After the girl finished shouting, she extracted two thick Kukri knives from her sides and pointed them to the sky. The polished blade that could even be used as a mirror reflected the bright and brilliant sunlight.

“We will beat you and get the Hahashik back, at the same time obtain the mountains and

lowlands, returning them the original Shinaak world, the next step to archive our goal is the holy war! So I… chief of the Shinaak tribe, Nanak Dar, by this name I declare the beginning of the holy war!”

She waved down both swords at same time, and accurately aimed the tip at Yatori– She, the chief of Shinaak tribe, the youngest in history to reach such leading position, Nanak Dar raised her chest and with an imposing bearing made a declaration of war:

“Prepare yourselves! O devils of the plains!”

***

“–After such declaration, the enemy immediately retreated to the Grand Arfatra Mountains. The loss we suffered, starting from Major Yuskushiram Taekk, including the guards totals five men, all dead… These were the reports of Warrant Officer Yatorishino.”

In the command room, with the sunset leaking in from the open window, Lieutenant General Safida who finished listening to the subordinate’s report lightly nodded his head with an affirming sound while keeping staring out of the window.

Although he was initially greatly shocked from the news of his colleague being killed, but after calming down finishing listening till the end to the report, no matter how, he had restored his cool head. Now he even seems to have enough margin to care whether his beard near the mouth is a little bit overgrown.

“Yusku passed away? It’s regrettable to lose such talent.”

These words of farewell harbored no emotion at all. Although to the Lieutenant General, losing an as talented aid as the Major was not something he shouldn’t feel sorry about– but honestly, the daily pesky advices on everything just like his subordinate sister, irked him a lot.

“Those Shinaak mountain folks even dared to proclaim a holy war, they really do not understand the position they are in. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes sir…”

“They were still likable when they were only barking, however they now even dared to claim they will bite, even I can’t let those untamed stray dogs roam as they please.”

The lieutenant general said so with a lacking tone. The underling behind did not notice the shallow smile that appeared on his mouth, and did not find out the dull tone used to mask the reckless excitement caused by the happy mood.

“It seems the time for mass extradition has come…it always pained me that the Grand Arfatra Mountains became the residence of stray dogs. So far I let them off on the friendly neighbor relationship we had, since they bit the hand that fed them, there are no other alternatives.”

Hah…an uncontrollable laugh leaked from Lieutenant General’s mouth, his heart truly was filled with gratitude.

In the extremely boring job of managing the northern region, repressing the Shinaak tribe was one of lieutenant general's biggest entertainment. The tribes living in the northern mountains to him were nothing more than unclean and brutal human-like creatures, hunting them was just a stimulating and enjoyable game.

Having said so, legally even the Shinaak tribe was considered empire citizen, even him with his position of Lieutenant General could not openly regard them as hunting subjects. In addition to occasionally punishing those with thievery tendencies, what he could do was setting heavy taxes and taking away the spirits to abuse the Shinaak tribe. That was true till now.

–I did not expect the other party would take the initiative in creating the pretext…!

Lieutenant general Safida liked war. Because when ordering huge amounts of soldiers, he truly felt the authority of being the supreme commander of the northern region. His self-esteem, inflated to a curved shape could only be filled with gratification in such situations.

Not to mention that the fight with the Shinaak tribe was something he could only wish for. To be able of doing something he enjoyed while at the same time getting rid of those annoying people, of course he couldn't find a more wonderful recreational activity.

"I found the previous declaration of war a sign of rebellion from the whole tribe, our side must also act appropriately."

"Yes sir. Then we must have all the bases in the northern region rise their alert level…"

"That's too lenient. Gather soldiers from all bases and form a punitive force, the formation will be brigades."

Hearing the superior's orders, the subordinates could not help but doubt their own ears.

"…Sir you mean; our forces will take the initiative in attacking the Grand Arfatra Mountains?"

"What are you surprised for? You also know the northern region have small scale bases scattered all around because of the supply problems, if we continue like this we face the risk of the enemy taking them one after another, that's why we must turn that over by taking the initiative to attack."

Lieutenant general made this assertion confidently. A defensive battle didn't suit his character; the only way is to use huge amounts of soldiers to one-sidedly trample other ethnic groups–the heated stare he carried away gave this information.

"If our side gave an all-out attack, those guys would be too busy to defend to do anything else. We just need to act according the words of wisdom that says 'attack is the best form of defense'. Is there anything else?"

"No… None sir… I don't have any question… it's just, basically we still should hear the Major's opinion–"

Although the already ingrained habit made the officer say those words, however the figure that would make reasonable decisions was no longer in this world. Reminded of this fact, he could only remain silent.

Lieutenant general Safida took the subordinate's silence as agreement, happily hummed

air from the nose. Then, like it suddenly came to his mind, added:

“–Right, do not report Yusku’s death to Central yet.”

“Huh? But sir…”

“Regardless of what, there will be sacrifices in a crusade. It’s not too late to wait till the end of the war and send the whole list together, that way is more natural.”

Lieutenant general Safida while using a randomly made up reason to convince his subordinate, at the same time was thinking– the moment they know of Yusku’s death, they will immediately dispatch the next overseer right? It is so annoying. But I will have to accept it sooner or later, but I still want to hold out as long as I can.

That’s right, at least until the punitive expedition is over. Until I have fully enjoyed this war that came from the heavens….

***

Once dinnertime came, in the canteen there was this subtle but noticeable difference in atmosphere from the usual. Even if it was oblivious no one was speaking loudly, however the chatter that was intentionally toned down was rampaging no stop. This was totally a symptom of the tension.

The members of the order of Knights were of no exception. After everybody globed down the food, all five were currently in a posture of intently listening to Yatori’s words.

“…. Holy war… Yatori, let me confirm this, did the opponent really say those exact words?”

After the first round of explanation, Ikta asked with frowning brows. Yatori nodded heavily.

“Yes, they indeed said so. Their resolution was quite firm.”

“Meaning they will do it even knowing such difference in combat power? We are really being hated huh.”

Matthew said with a bitter expression, Torway next to him kept holding the hands on his knees remaining silent.

“Although Major Taekk’s death was regrettable, but at present we had just lost to Kioka, right now national power is being consumed, thinking of having infighting within the empire is simply madness. What should be done is looking for ways to live in harmony.”

“I… I think so too, I can’t find any reason to wage war.”

Haro concurred with her Highness Chamille’s opinion. But, with just a look at the surrounding you could find the people with opposite opinions who were clearly much more noticeable.

“Isn’t it good enough to have a direct confrontation? We should make use of this time and have those guys of the Shinaak tribe truly understand the situation they are in.”

“Those mountain folks dares to be so arrogant, I want to make them suffer the same fate as our dead companions!”

“We should revenge Major Taekk, the Major himself would wish so!”

Blood boiling comments came one after another. In addition, it was fueled by the fact that there were already victims, compared to the faction unwilling to go to war, the aggressive warmonger faction seems to get the blessing in such situation. There were no doubts, furthermore the simple concept of revenge war especially drove the soldiers’ sense of justice.

Once the wave inciting war became louder it naturally becomes more difficult to raise objections. That was the very natural mass psychology– because of this no one expected that in such unified upcoming atmosphere, there would be someone who dared to fearlessly advocate with a voice louder than anyone else a ‘NO’.

“Are you guys all drunk?! How can there be a knight excited about such war?!”

The fingers closed in a tight fist hit the table, at the same time his huge body stood on the chair and spoke with raised voice, it was Warrant Officer Deinkun.

Although the crowd felt overwhelmed by the eardrum shattering voice, that was only at the beginning, laughers and jeers soon came and covered the whole floor.

“Huh, this is so unlike you, Warrant Officer Deinkun. Wasn’t it you, not so long ago that wanted to go to war more than anyone else?”

“That was of course the extreme case! Because at that time the opponent was the hated republic of Kioka!… Listen me well you guys. The so called sword of knights can only be swung to fight back the threat of enemies from foreign countries! It absolutely is not a weapon used to kill fellow citizens!”

Deinkun asserted so loudly. Although the laughers disappeared, but there was someone who replaced it with icy cold sarcasm.

“Stop screaming lousy words, to put it simply you got scared right?”

“…. What?”

“Meaning that when war truly appeared in front of you, you became a coward. You clearly possess a body more massive than others yet you are still so unsuccessful, even saying something like sword of knights, it truly makes me disgusted.”

“…. You want to insult my honor? If you dare so I want to hear you say it again!”

The muscular Agra stood up and stared at each other with Dekkun. Since both of them were comparable brawny men, once this escalates into a fighting incident, the canteen must be prepared to be completely trashed.

“What are you being noisy for! Keep quiet! Quiet!”

Only thanks to the intervention of the patrol officers that the big tragedy could be avoided. Agra harshly smashed his lips and sat down again, Deinkun also distorted away his line sight away from the other and sat down.

Under the repression exercised by the superior, the canteen was under high pressure and

full of silence. As expected, the second after the officer returned to the corridor after inspecting the room, the conversation immediately revamped. Although there was a feeling the volume was toned down, but the number of conversations increased instead.

“…That was surprising, the Warrant Officer Hargunska full of fighting spirit decided to side with the non-war faction this time.”

Haro said so with a tad of intimacy, hearing that Yatori too revealed a faint smile.

“Thinking that was surprising is a faux pas of his assessment. As he himself stated, the so called knight is an existence to protect the country and its people from foreign countries’ invasion. Thus feeling resistance in having to act against the empire’s citizen would be the natural emotion.”

Different from the self-proclaimed knight Deinkun, Yatori’s words, the empire nominated knight, in name and reality, harbored a relative weight. Torway, while looking at Yatori with admiring eyes, added too:

“I think so as well. Furthermore, I think Dekkun is really great to be able to speak up the minority’s opinion in the earlier atmosphere. Because I though those kind of actions were something only Ikkun would do.”

“…Yeah, that indeed is the case. Speaking of which, the guy who can’t read the atmosphere and always exaggerate stuff… Sorlok, that’s your own unparalleled clique right? This time someone is imitating your forte huh?”

Her Highness Chamille spoke words full of sarcasm, Ikta instead completely ignored her. The youth holding his hands at chest while assuming a fetal position on the chair, stared into nothingness with empty eyes.

“…Holy war…. Holy war huh…Ah holy war…”

“What? Are you still fixated on that?”

Yatori watched Ikta with suspicious eyes, Ikta instead murmured with a deep voice:

“…there is no such use.”

“…..?”

“It does not exist, in the Shinaak tribe language there is no world representing ‘Holy war’”

The others couldn’t understand what he thought and could only tilt their head in confusion.

Ikta recovering his gaze started to explain:

“For the Shinaak tribe, warfare is simply competition for survival, in other words it’s just the most extreme display of the natural law of ‘the strong survive and the weak perish’. They do not affirm nor deny war, they just accept it as the plain truth of this world– it’s only they will never make the war ‘sacred’.”

“…You mean those guys from the Shinaak tribe do not require a righteous cause?”

“Of course they do, the tribe’s prosperity and happiness is their righteousness. However, to them that is not some ‘sacred thing’. In another perspective the wealth obtained through

warfare is nothing but property seized from others, and the reason is for your own beneficence. So that is just being unscrupulous for the sake of survival, it's something completely opposite from sanctity."

After reaching that point, Ikta paused and lightly stroked Kusu's head in the waist bag.

"The subjects revered by the Shinaak people are different, they are Hahashik– the four great spirits in our pocket. The Shinaak people without exception consider these children who consider us human masters and devote themselves without condition, as 'sacred beings'… we too understand it very well because when these children want to protect their human masters, they do so with no regard of their own status."

In a world where the strong survive and the weak perish the spirits are the lone exception. In order to help the humans that are a completely different race, they not only put in all their efforts but also won't require any form of return from the humans for their dedication. They wouldn't say a word no matter how cruel their treatment was, the same even if they were shattered into pieces.

"There is only one thing in this world that the Shinaak people define as 'sacred'– that is the existence of spirits who wholeheartedly devote to their masters. 'Sacred' and 'spirits' not only are interchangeable, any former non-interchangeable use of them are unlikely to have ever been recorded. Not to mention to mix it with a vulgar world such as 'war' is simply absurd."

"…. I now understand what you mean. But what if their determination to start the war has a direct connection to the spirits?"

–You took them away from us, if that's not cold-blooded brute then what is?!

Yatori while vividly remembering the words the Shinaak girl told her, asked a question.

"By the look of it, you too are aware of that matter?"

The 'matter' Ikta said was one of the repression policy lieutenant general Safida implemented, the action of taking away the spirits from the Shinaak tribe. The others, without understanding what they were talking about felt very confused, the two however without minding them, continued.

"…The spirits have been taken away by the enemy; spirits are sacred existence; if you want to take back the stolen sacred beings, in any case you have to wage war. Then this war is truly a 'Holy war'– if it is determined the Shinaak tribe was using the above reasoning, is there anything unreasonable?"

"None, this is the perfect sophistry scheme, it's so perfect that it makes me feel queasy."

After speaking with disdain to his own words, without hiding his displeasure, Ikta re-opened his twisted mouth:

"However this theory of their smart tricks is only something that us, who have understood their morals and ethics, can think of…. As I have said before, if it was the Shinaak people alone they definitely wouldn't sanctify war. Therefore, will not twist the truth just to sanctify this war, let's not even talk about what is used or not, that is not a thought that they would even conceive."

Ikta concluded and bitterly grinded his teeth. His appearance was like spitting out lava.

“Since it obliviously should have been so, they still used the word ‘Holy war’, then there is only one answer– there is someone else, a mastermind behind. Coming from outside, instilling the previously completed fallacy to the guys from Shinaak tribe.”

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The night passed, and morning came.

Under the command of the supreme commander of the Northern Garrison Lieutenant General Safida it is issued a formal announcement, because of the murder of Major Taekk and Co a punitive force will be assembled.

By the time of mobilization, the troops were predicted to reach eighteen thousand people, becoming a military operation on a scale without precedence in the history of the northern region.

–Unrest at Katjvarna’s northern boundaries.

The war thus begun, covering a part of the Empire’s history with a thick layer of compatriots’ blood.

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 2 - Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Unrest at Katjvarna’s Northern Boundaries

第三章

Alderamin on the Sky Ⅱ

カトヴァーナ北域動乱

Beginning from the foothills of the Grand Arfatra Mountains, countless military boot footprints marked the ground.

Including PFC Kanna Temari who was at the front of the ranks, the imperial army marched forward, while continuing to increase the number of prints. They formed long continuous rows on the narrow mountain road, if there were someone who could observe the current situation from above, I'm afraid they wouldn't be able to differentiate them from ants' march.

"Huff…huff…huff…"

In a situation where the burden on the lower body continuously increased, Kanna desperately tried to maintain her breathing to a certain rhythm.

Having to march uphill while carrying heavy baggage, for Kanna who has long graduated from being a recruit this felt like an overly demanding task. They haven't even reached a fifth of the itinerary, moreover this was not something that would end with some easy relaxing when they reached the top. Their orders were to reach the top and crush the enemy.

–Defeating the enemy, shooting at human beings… Murdering lives.

Once she started thinking about it like that, adding to the physical weights, made Kanna really want to throw away the air gun strapped to her shoulder. Since she was at it, the backpack and uniform too… throw away everything beside her partner Tabb.

"Halt! Halt! Start the general break!"

The soldiers exhaled in relief after hearing the superior's roar. They began to sit down from the row that finished the roll call and while they should be allowed to have conversation, not many voices were heard. Probably because everyone thought that if they were to waste energy here, their current actions may later result in a fatal injury.

"Air gunners, let your partners swallow the bullets first! Rapeseeds will be distributed to the incineration troops, you too let your spirits eat that!"

Expecting to encounter enemy soldiers, the superior ordered to assume an offensive formation while climbing up the mountain. Being an air gunner unit, Kanna took out ball-shaped bullets from her pocket and fed it to Tabb's mouth. The bullet swallowed by the partner will automatically move to the air tunnel in the spirit's body, furthermore the spirit itself will become a safety device, therefore there's no need to worry about misfire.

While feeding the second bullet to Tabb, Kanna secretly observed her surroundings. The incineration troops got the rapeseeds containing large amount of oil, they made their partner eat those oil-rich tiny black particles, when the fire spirits spit out the residues, their body were already supplemented with fuel.

"…the war is getting closer."

Seeing this spectacle, an emotion different from pure fatigue surfaced in Kanna's chest. That is the fear of forgetting the atrocity of killing each other when you are just looking at your feet when marching forward.

"…this is not what I had wished for."

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Till the moment she stepped onto the escort wagon, her highness Chamille didn't stop complaining to the members of the order of knights.

The carriage ferrying the nobles fleeing the flames of war left to the south, the guard duty for the journey was left in charge to a battalion. While the uneasiness still remained due the previous instance of betrayal from personal guards, however considering the geographical characteristics of the northern region, there shouldn't be many with enough backbone to revolt against the royalties — this optimism was fairly rational.

"So they left… honestly I am relieved. Although the princess said otherwise, but since the war has already begun, a noble such as the princess shouldn't keep staying on the frontlines."

Among the members of order of knights who came to see her off, no one objected to Haro's thought.

The fort they were moving to was in close proximity to the Grand Arfatra Mountains, which was where the Shinaak tribe lived. If the enemy were to obtain info regarding the princess' presence, the chances of her being targeted would be really high.

"…. let's first not talk about the escort operation itself…moving to the new post in the base on the southern tip of the northern region itself is…."

A skeptical expression emerged on Matthew's face, it was because Lieutenant General Safida did not let her Highness the Princess go back to Central, instead he just evacuated her to the southern part of the northern region. While she would be far from the battlefield thus the risk was not high, however for it should have been a 'Conclusion reached taking the safety of the royalty as first priority', there is no doubt this choice would come hard to understand to others.

"From the princess' current standpoint, returning to Central isn't necessarily the safest… but even if we were not to consider this, we should still think that behind this matter of not wanting to return the princess is the desire of forestalling interference from the Lieutenant Generals in central."

Torway shared his thoughts–Even if he were to command as Lieutenant General, it still wouldn't shut the mouth of a royalty. There was intelligence in the northern base that would be really bad if it was gotten a hold of by the princess who returned to Central, thus she was to be left in the northern region. Having this kind of thoughts was a very natural reaction, Yatori too nodded in agreement.

"The responsibility of safeguarding the local security on all four sides of the Empire is totally left respectively to the Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern garrison. Thus Lieutenant General Safida's particularly fervent involvement in the Shinaak Tribe's armed rebellion was also inevitable in such case…. Having said that, since he mobilized the troops to this extent on such big scale, he should have first reported to central and asked for instructions."

“I can hardly believe he would have honestly followed those steps. Since just the day after the incident, he already informed the whole army to marshal a punitive force to subjugate the Shinaak tribe, this totally shows how Lieutenant General is grandstanding.”

Ikta didn’t hide his unhappy mood. Because he was not joking like he usually would have, it made Matthew feel extremely alarmed.

“…. Bu… But, no matter how the war will evolve, in the end we still would be maintain our current standby status right? Even if coming to this new post in the northern region was to let us accumulate practical experience, but this kind of situation was not expected. Even Lieutenant General Safida wouldn’t send the precious High Grade Military Officer cadets to the dangerous frontlines right?”

“This is a very legitimate claim, my buddy Matthew… but it’s really sad, the so called common sense is only meaningful to those who understands common sense, right now we can only pray Lieutenant General is one of these people.”

“…That’s true, especially now that Major Taekk has passed away.”

Although they spoke those words, both Ikta and Yatori showed no sign of expectation. Even Torway who always smoothed things over is now sticking to a heavy silence.

While thinking he should make mental preparations as soon as possible, Matthew looked over to the peak of the Grand Arfatra Mountains surrounded by thick clouds. Five seconds after him, Haro too reached the same conclusion.

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That evening, after learning that a certain cargo coming from central was delivered here, Ikta called Torway over to the outdoor shooting training field after midnight.

He set a row of targets tens of meters away from the firing position, at night it looked like dark figure standing side by side. Hard to believe legends were also circulating among the soldiers here because of these sinister atmospheres.

“What’s the matter Ikkun. Is there something here…?”

Ikta didn’t answer Torway’s question, he just kept quietly walking forward, shortly after, they arrived at the corner of the shooting ground, there he uncovered the drapes hiding a certain object with substantial longitudinal width.

The thing that appeared from under the cloth was a gun rack with the attached lock, and the air guns that hang there. The total number was around forty, every single of them shone with the light of new metals, making people understand at first glance they were brand new goods manufactured not long ago.

“Yours– this one is good, take and try it.”

Ikta opened the lock on the gun rack and urged Torway’s action. He picked up one of those and in an instant, his experience as air gunner already told him something felt wrong.

“…. This gun is extremely heavy…? It clearly has the same length of my usual air gun but the weigh is double…”

“I already obtained permission from superiors, starting from tomorrow use this in trainings… honestly I originally intended to replace all air gunners commanded by the order of knights, which mean including mine and Matthew’s troops’ equipment with these, but at the current stage, just making them send this many experimental works was the most I could ask for. Although mass production should soon start.”

“Experimental work…? Then, Ikkun, in other words this is…”

“Basically I only had the soldiers test-fire them, the result was not bad. With your skills, you should be able to quickly understand the differences of these from the old air guns. Although the basic usage is the same, the maintaining process had changed a little, in that regard I will find some time to teach you in dept. Also, although the numbers are limited, try to let everybody shoot some of these new kind of ammunition.”

The youth while finishing speaking, took out an acorn shaped bullets stored in the cotton stuffed crate. He did not elaborate further to the confused Torway, instead he proceeded with more instructions:

“In short, you have to get used to this while we can. After all we don’t know for how many more days we will remain training here, and don’t know for how long we will be able to stay out of the war which already begun… However, as long as you can get familiar with this equipment, in perilous moments your troops will become our trump cards.”

After this summary came to an end, Ikta put back the air gun and covered the gun rack with cloth, he then left the training grounds.

…The next morning Torway, who used these air guns in actuality, felt indescribable surprise.

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The third day after the march, at past ten in the morning. The battle began on the frontline at an elevation of 2000 meters.

The enemy built a fort to block the mountain road and was waiting.

The Shinaak tribe was hiding in the fortress made of wood and mud-bricks, once they sighted the empire troops, they immediately launched a full attack.

“What are you people afraid of! Advance! I said Advance!”

In a situation where arrows and bullets were falling down like rain, Kanna and others were forced into a desperate battle. The imperial army’s strategy was very simple, just breaking through frontally through a human wave attack.

Tl note: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_wave_attack

Their commander seems to have concluded that compared to the losses they would suffer

from backtracking and finding a detour to fight at the next fortress, fighting upfront by forcibly breaking through would be more convenient. Furthermore, Supreme commander Safida requested a ‘daring and swift attack’ which also contributed to the decision:

“This is definitely impossible–”

Kanna murmured with trembling voice three minutes after the fighting begun…. No matter the era, it was always the soldiers on the frontline who would first find out the mistakes a superior make when estimating the lives cost. This time Kanna was also included in those people.

A fist sized shell came flying sending the male soldiers around Kanna flying. A piece of flesh is missing from the leg directly hit by the artillery revealing the broken bones, but it did not possess the power to grant immediate death to those hit. This was in fact a very cruel tactic. The battlefield was filled with panicked and painful cries from companions who were unable to move because of injuries.

“Do not flinch! That would be falling for the enemy’s strategy! Act like soldiers and bravely challenge the enemy!”

Even commanders were inciting soldiers like this, but the loss the imperial army suffered of course wasn’t due to a lack of morale. To the eyes of Kanna, who was pushed to the frontline, the true reason could be said to be understood at a glance.

“I said this was impossible……! Don’t they see how many wind mortars the enemy has set up on the ramp?!”

Just looking up, in front of them was a whole row of cannon muzzles. The consecutive shells shot from the muzzle sent the soldiers flying, extreme impacts had them bounce and roll off the slopes. In dangerous situations a single shell could hit four to five people.

Just as Kanna had seen through, Shinaak tribe warriors’ use of wind mortars had reached almost maximum efficiency. Short range, insufficient power, difficult handling– these shortcoming were well known, but there was in fact a unique method of utilizing them that makes up all of these.

That was to line them up on high places and after setting the muzzle beforehand, engage the enemy who wants to climb up the slope. That alone would make the mortars perfect. First by relying on the aid gravity gives, it can increase its firing range, the power would of course increase too; then setting the muzzle to an angle that’s is parallel to the slope, it makes ‘Aiming and firing at the enemy’ so easy that it’s surprising.

When firing on flat grounds, normally the shells had to be fired at an upward oblique angle, and hit the enemy after travelling a curved arc. Thus you could archieve the longest firing range, but on the other side it was also extremely hard to hit the enemy with accuracy. The reason was because in that situation the soldiers had to at same time aim horizontally at the enemy and also calculate the vertical angle.

However, if you were meeting the enemy’s assault from a slope, this would suddenly become easy. Because if you had aligned the muzzle parallel to the angle of the slope, considering how the enemy could only have attacked, crawling up the slope, then there would have been no need to re-adjust the angle. Furthermore, the shells could in one shot

get rid of all enemies in a line.

As a further step if you could prepare wind mortars in enough numbers to fill longitudinally the mountain road that formed the slope, then the groundwork would be perfect. The defending side did not even need to aim, they just had to keep firing in order to defeat the majority of the enemy, as for the few who managed to slip thorough, the air guns and crossbows would do the job.

Kanna's current situation was really similar to this theory. Even if they wanted to use the huge difference in numbers to overwhelm the enemy, but short story, the enemy's current shelling was too intense, of course there wouldn't be many brave enough to dare a frontal assault rushing up this slope of death.

On the other hand, after considering the fortress made by wood and mud-brick should be susceptible to fires, the incendiary corps tried to shoot burning arrows toward the enemy's field.

However, the shooting range of the crossbows was shorter than the enemy's air guns and wind mortars, which meant in order to make this plan work they had to run into the hail of bullets, few were also the heroes who would be able to pull this off. The hearts of the soldiers on the front were filled with fear, and this fear would in a blink of eye transmit to the rear.

"We have to bring out the wind mortars too! If we have wind mortars supporting the infantry, then we would be fighting under the same circumstances!"

This was shouted by the commander who had lost his patience, but of course this order was also a mistake. With the current situation, unless they fix the issue of the two side being at different altitude, the conditions would definitely not be the same. The initial decision to force a frontal assault to break through had already signed the imperial army would fight an unfavorable battle.

However, albeit thinking it as a mistake, orders were orders, and soldiers had to obey. Granted that Kanna wasn't part of artillery units, but using wind mortars required multiple wind spirits, which is why together with the comrades in the same squad she had the duty to bring her partner Tabb to the artillery platform.

"We need to go, follow me and don't fall behind!"

"…Uuh… okay! Let's go! Private Yazan, you too get up!"

Kanna finally suppressed the fear in her heart, grabbed the hand of the only junior who was her squad and rushed out from behind the rock. The air gunner a year younger than her reluctantly followed, but maybe because he was too scared and was running with a staggering pace, in the mere ten meters they ran, he almost fell three times.

"Get your act together! Okay, now put your partner in this battery! Do you still remember how to do it?"

"Ah…ah…ah…"

" I understand… your brain went blank huh… anyway copy my actions!"

Kanna while taking care of the junior who was fundamentally useless, put the wind spirit

Tabb in the connection port of the wind mortar. She aligned the air tunnel in Tabb's body to the nozzle and tightly wrapped the fixing belt. However, when she was just about to extend her hand to do the job for Private Yazan who was being slow, suddenly a chill ran back her spine– with the corner of her eye she saw the enemy's muzzle was aimed right at them.

"This is bad…! Squad leader! This place is also being targeted!"

Kanna, while speaking, loosened the fixing equipment with actions as if to break the belt and picked Tabb up. She then ran to cover while dragging Private Yazan– although he was being too slow fixing the wind spirit, in this case it became a stroke of luck.

A second later, the shell that came flying hit the mortar barrel, shattering the wind mortar. However, Kanna and the companions from the same squad managed to take cover behind a rock in the nick of time.

Hu~ the earlier breathless Kanna started inhaling again, right then the squad leader spoke to her:

"PFC Kanna, it's all thanks to you noticing the earlier attack that we managed to avoid the same fate as that worn-out mortar."

"Ha…Haha…you're welcome… it would be a great help if the enemy's wind mortar was a little more worn-out…."

Although Kanna's answer held no particular meaning, what was amazing was, from then on the enemy's shelling began to decline. The shelling density fell, air gun shootings also became sporadic, finally the battlefield became completely silent.

The commander was left in wonder as he couldn't figure out the reason the enemy would loosen up on attacks in such moment, but after thinking for a short while he found a plausible reason and made a heartfelt cheer.

"Great, those guys ran out of ammunitions! You guys, quickly charge!"

The soldiers advanced forward taking the superior's worlds with a grain of salt but in the end they truly did not encounter resistance. Or it should be said the fortress was left empty, there were totally no living being left inside.

The enemy must have considered the moment they exhausted ammunitions was the right time to close the curtains on the battle so decided to retreat. The commander, not resigning as he didn't get the chance to retaliate the same treatment they were subjected to, fiercely smacked his lips– these barbarians sure are quick in running away.

"Send out the pursuing units! The enemy should still be nearby!"

Right after the battle, without even getting the time to catch a breath, the pursuing units received a new order to sortie…. however, the enemies were scattered in all directions because of the advantage in geographical knowledge unique to local residents they had which made the soldier's effort end in vain, in the end the pursuing concluded with the scenario of them not capturing any of the fugitives.

"They make ire me so much…! …. Forget it, after all we obtained victory in the first battle! This is what matters!"

Compared to the enemy who virtually got almost no losses at all, the imperial army suffered one hundred twenty-four casualties, the number of injured was ten times greater. They had no enemy prisoner, and of course got no information regarding the enemy camp.

When the military commander in charge considered this a ‘Victory’, they already had one foot in the grave. But at that time only few were aware of this fact.

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Three weeks after the punitive army against the Shinaak tribe left for the Grand Arfatra Mountains, perhaps it could be said to be expected? The order for the High Grade Military Officer cadets like Ikta to standby was cancelled. Instead they were tasked to do resupplying missions and transport materials back and forth from the base to the foothill of the mountain.

“Although I had already expected so, but the extent of this lack of planning is just way too much.”

Ikta complained while directing the soldiers who were pulling the cart. What was piled up like a mountain on the cart was not food nor ammunition but huge amounts of clothing.

“They actually told us to bring overcoats and gloves as soon as possible. Do you understand? The funny part is they are saying as soon as possible at this point. It can’t be the Lieutenant General didn’t know it was really cold on the mountains, what do you think, Suuya?”

“I don’t know how to respond to that question even if you were to ask me that… I can’t just can’t bear the thought of how our comrades on the frontline are suffering the cold.”

“Suuya your kindness rivals that of the virgin Mary. When you will be feeling cold I will warm you up with my body warmth.”

“In that situation please make a fire– well we have arrived.”

Suuya while dealing with the frivolous superior, told the troops they had reached the destination. At the foothill of the Grand Arfatra Mountains was established an supply relay station in addition to the multiple soldier camps, there was even a huge tent erected for the commander. After noticing the delivery of the goods, soldiers immediately came to check on the contents.

“Yeah, the third illumination training platoon has now arrived. The content of the cargo are large amounts of coats and gloves.”

“You have worked hard Warrant Officer. I will immediately confirm the contents.”

Ikta left alone the soldier who neatly started the checking and started to look around his surroundings. He immediately noticed something was out of place– The number of units waiting around because their superior was absent was incredibly high.

The feeling of something being out of place turned in an instant into nasty premonitions, making him feel like it would be best if he left as soon as possible– after reasoning this,

Ikta turned to leave but the soldier who finished the checking hurriedly stopped him.

“I am terribly sorry, there is another matter….”

“…Isn’t the checking already over?”

“It’s not that, please go in that tent. The superior has called for you.”

Tl note: it’s hard to render in English but the soldier has been speaking in an extremely polite manner

Seeing the direction the soldier was pointing to, Ikta’s face clearly pulled down– the nasty premonition came true. Having said that, he couldn’t find any reason to escape and could only give up. Ikta shrugged and left the platoon, Suuya too nervously watched him leaving.

“Excuse me… Hn… Whoa…”

Just lifting the cloth covering the tent’s entrance made Ikta speak those words. The reason, inside the tent he though could only fit four to five people, right now was crammed with more than ten officers sitting side by side. Furthermore, they were all faces he knows, the other three members of order of knights, excluding Haro, were also present.

Tl note: In the original it literary said ‘open the door to the tent’ but I though lifting cloth was more appropriate since we are talking about tents.

“You are Warrant Officer Ikta Sorlok right? Sit down over there.”

Hearing the order from someone wearing a Lieutenant class badge, Ikta sat down after reaching the corner of the tent. Confirming all seats were now occupied, the male officer begun to talk about the topic.

“I am late in presentation; I am Lieutenant Amuuse Surkatta. I will be taking responsibility for managing your troops instead of Lieutenant Sazaruf who was dispatched the frontlines. Therefore, the order I am about to give is one from your direct superior, you have to remember this well.”

Since Lieutenant Sazaruf who was the instructor guiding the cadets was enlisted in the first wave of the punitive army and sent to the frontlines, Ikta and others who were sent from Central were left in a pending standby position, it was finally decided they would go under this Lieutenant Surkatta.

“Although you were already tasked to transport materials from the base, the next order is to transport materials from here to the next relay station. First take a look at the map previously distributed.”

The maps were distributed earlier and the only one who got the map now was Ikta alone. The youth after taking a look at the supply line shallowly cutting into the Grand Arfatra Mountains, gently sighted.

“The road to destination is as shown on the map. The goods you will be tasked to transport includes food, ammunition and clothing– They were the things you transported here so there’s no need to go too much into details. Do you have any questions?”

The bucktoothed Cosala from the group assigned from Central raised his hand.

“That… it means, we too will be sent to the frontline?”

The confirming to the question came in a reproaching tone, but this was a sentiment shared between most of the High Grade Military Officer cadets.

–All these people are elite cadets! Shouldn’t you treat them with more care? Coming to the northern region was just a simple midway stage, to think they got us involved in such troublesome dispute!

Even without clearly stating so, their expressions showed that. Lieutenant Surkatta coughed once.

“…. It’s too exaggerated to say frontlines. The next relay point is just some place closer to the battlefield than here, the route to there is also guaranteed to be secured. The possibility of encountering enemy during the travel is presumably fairy low, but of course you still have to be careful.”

Lieutenant Surkatta finished answering with this and asked whether there were more questions. This time it was Yatori who raised her hand.

“Lieutenant, I don’t see medics division in here, may I ask where they went?”

This question was sprung from Haro’s absence. The Lieutenant answered this promptly too:

“They were sent to destination before you because we wanted to set up a field hospital as soon as possible.”

Yatori after nodding lowered her hand, however commotion spread among the others. Because from Lieutenant Surkatta’s words emerged the reality that injured unceasingly increased on the frontline. The atmosphere in the tent became heavier.

“Are there more questions? …if there aren’t I will now organize the transporting units into troops, it obliviously is my job to integrate the units of all present and unify into a central command. Good, as instructed go outside and mobilize the troops.”

The young officers asked to leave all harbored bitter expressions and their footsteps were especially heavy.

“…They actually pushed us out so quickly. Really, the frontline looks pretty miserable.”

Ikta whispered while slowly walking at the rearmost of the group.

***

Under almost the same circumstances of the first battle, for two more time Kanna fought the Shinaak tribe hiding in fortresses. Wherein the second battle they made the detachment split into two and attack on two fronts which resulted in ending without taking serious losses; However, they once again fell into the predicament of fighting uphill with a hail of bullets during the third battle.

“…Huff…. huff…. huff…. huff….”

Kanna dragged along her exhausted body that finally made it past the breakthrough which lasted half a day, in order to further advance in the invasion, they continued mountaineering. It was impossible to recover the stamina with just one hour of general resting, adding in the worsening weather, the soldier's morale fell sharply.

–I did not expect my body was so tenacious.

Remaining unscathed after three battles, Kanna herself was taken aback. Maybe she was born to be on the battlefield? The fear in her heart that made her shrink during the first battle, was already half gone by the second, when the third battle came, she even understood how to not easily die.

"Well Yazan, you have to more consciously adjust your breathing. Inhale twice and exhale once, inhale~inhale~exhale~ this way. Because if you keep gasping for air you will feel even more tired."

"Ye-Yes… I'm really sorry, Lance Corporal Kanna…."

Tl note: Lance corporal is a rank above PFC and one below corporal.

The recruit, Private Yazan, managed to keep his life thanks to the many helps from her. Although Kanna inadvertently seemed to have become the one responsible for the care of Yazan, she herself was not bothered by it. After all she couldn't just throw away this junior who was seemingly helpless, then the idea of simply take care of him from the beginning felt easier.

"You don't need to apologize. While you indeed are dragging me down, however I also know you are truly putting all your efforts."

Besides that, the reason to caring for another diverted Kanna from her thoughts. While fighting, people would naturally be terrified, even during the period they were marching people would be pestered by anxiety attacks. Maybe I won't survive next time, maybe the enemy will jump out from behind the rock over there, and so on…

Being called 'Lance corporal' she was unaccustomed to, made Kanna recall the comrades in her squad who left the march because of the wounds they suffered. She worried about whether him, who had been shot in the abdomen, would be eligible to go get treatment in the rear.

On the other hand, precisely because that person left, the sentence 'the one to take over my position will be Kanna Temari' made Kanna a nominal Lance corporal. The thought of him naming herself to take over, increase her sense of responsibility even more.

"Halt! …. Spotted a fortress ahead!"

The soldiers in front warned. Hearing the word fortress, Kanna, who thought they had to fight for another time an enemy hiding inside, felt very frustrated, however the report of the scout who had gone to investigate betrayed her expectation.

"The presence of enemies could not be confirmed! There is nobody inside!"

The commander pondered for a moment by putting his hand on his chin which was pitch black because of the unshaven beard.

"We are at high ground, the position is good too… Very well let's make use of this fort!

The two platoon behind, follow me!”

Kanna and others who were called, after going to the observation point found there truly was an abandoned fortress. In the particularly prominent rocks in the surrounding seems to be dug trenches, it even had the space to station more than one hundred soldiers.

“Here is the most suitable place to engage the enemy… good, let’s set up camp in here. But we can’t station the whole company here. Two platoons of air gunners, one platoon of illumination, and one platoon of medics should be enough.”

By the orders of the commander, the troops in front of the army started to be assigned to the camp. The unit Kanna was in was also included, to tell the truth it made Kanna sigh in relief. Because this way she didn’t have to climb anymore.

“But, there seems….”

After observing the surrounding scenery from the scouting post, Kanna felt in her heart was an uneasiness she couldn’t grasp the gist of. Why was that? She thought. Here the field of view was great, almost 360°, regardless of which side the enemy would attack, they would be spotted immediately. And to be in a defensive position, the advantages of high ground was so oblivious it doesn’t even need to be explained.

“I will lead the remaining troops and continue marching. Without further instructions, you have to defend this fort with your lives!”

“”””””””Yes,Sir ! ”””””””””

Kanna and others replied to the order with a conditioned like reflex response…however at this time, whether it was the one who gave the order nor those who received the order, nobody understood… the true intentions of the enemy who abandoned the fortress knowingly that it would be taken. And more importantly they didn’t understand the limitless burden an order like ‘with your lives’ carried.

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Ikta and team departed from the foothill of the mountain toward the next supply relay station. However, after reaching there with the carriage, they found another development waiting for them.

“Oya~ the old transport troops were all dispatched. So sorry to ask this but can you transport this to the next relay station deeper in?”

“I heard the next front is lacking in blankets, we are really busy with our tasks to you guys deliver it in our stead.”

“These are the required supply of bullets and rapeseeds. Don’t show an aloof attitude because you guys are elites, you should just all work!”

Just like that they suffered the same fate each time they delivered the goods. Lieutenant Surkatta’s order for the cadets to transport goods set the perfect precedent, the others thought ‘Well, if it’s like that then we too should make use of them’ and started dictating

them around.

Even the right to command the cadets had transferred from Lieutenant Surkatta to the other commanders. Among the officers in the northern region, many hated the High Grade Military Officer cadets, therefore the ‘guest’ treatment they had before changed in a blink of eye, they fell down to the position of people doing chores.

“…So friends, this is how we got dragged into the mountain step by step by doing the delivery task forced upon us to and fro…. Although I don’t know where has the frontline been pushed to, but the area around here cannot be called rear anymore.”

Ikta murmured while biting on the thin toasted bread which was the staple food.

The time was now dusk of the evening. In the camp amid the valley you could see the wounded sent back from the frontline, as well as the medics taking care of them who were hurriedly running left and right.

Although this development to him was still within the range of estimation, however the past him, who was still at the rear, was dragged into this quagmire with speeds faster than anticipated… The civil war had obliviously been going on for more than a month and half, yet no clear result came, which only made the soldiers’ anxiety and uneasiness grow further.

“Even with no achievements they should still prepare some countermeasure, like to exaggerate the reports of victories to maintain the morale… Don’t tell me Lieutenant General Safida couldn’t even take into account such small matter?”

While what Ikta said were only in words, if that really happened then it too would become something to be worried about, as he was thinking about is, he walked toward a tent with a basket in hand containing bread, tea and fruits. After closing in to the light leaking from fissure of the cloth covering the tent, one could hear the faint groan of injured coming from inside.

When he was just about to go in and greet, the curtain got lifted and a woman walked out. It was Haro with her medical apron deeply stained with the wounded’s blood. Once she saw Ikta, she took off the apron and revealed a stiff smile on her ashen face.

“Good evening, Ikta-san…. don’t tell me, that’s my dinner?”

“That’s right. Eating in the headquarters while hearing the higher-ups talk acrimony is unbearable, so I slipped out using the excuse delivering food to you. Let’s eat together, Haro.”

While talking Ikta lifted his hand and showed the basket. Haro softly smiled seemingly embarrassed.

“Sure… but, look at my appearance, won’t this affect appetite…?”

Haro asked while indicating to the uniform which still had traces of blood everywhere although she removed the apron. Just this was sufficient to figure out the reason of her poor complexion. As member of the medics’ division, Haro was exposed the harsh reality of the battlefield before anyone else in the order of knights.

However, Ikta totally did not care for such thing and with no change in expression,

shrugged.

“It’s unfortunate that tonight’s menu does not includes tomatoes.”

“…Haha, is that so? Then let’s eat together.”

The two found an appropriate spot beneath the shade of a tree and sat there. Under the low light of Kusu’s Lantern which created shadows, Ikta and Haro begun eating the simple foods and started a conversation.

“The field hospital’s business seems to be booming, the soldiers sent from the frontline are only growing.”

“Yeah, I’m rushing off my feet. Furthermore, the inventory of bandages, splints and disinfectants are already bottoming out.”

“I thought so. Although we have been refilling them day and night, honestly we do not have enough manpower. Like even now Yatori is still making the horses run around, borrowing some of light spirits from my troops as light source to shine on the road.”

Ikta said so with a disapproving tone. Haro who was sipping her tea while talking, suddenly stiffened her face.

“……Ikta-san. After finishing dinner, I intend do a report to the higher-ups.”

“Yes, we need to propose to reduce this front’s field, while also send a part of injured back to the rear at once right?”

Ikta finished her sentence. Haro only blankly stared at him.

“You definitely need to propose that. I wanted to tell them that before coming, but then I though your words as a medic would be more persuasive so I restrained myself. The least we have to do is move the field hospital more into the rear…. specifically, it needs to be re-set at lower altitude.”

“…. Ikta-san, when did you notice it…?”

“I already expected this since Lieutenant General Safida announced we would invade into the Grand Arfatra Mountains, furthermore I just had to in the fact that lately many soldiers were sent back with no trauma at all… Although I warned them of the dangers before this started, however it seems even having talked so much nothing reached the top brass’ ears.”

Haro looked at Ikta who was unhappily scratching his head and felt once again she got a glimpse of this youth’s unfathomable strength.

In this kind of busy life that simply made people disoriented, how could he notice such tremendous amount of details in areas outside of his duties? Haro totally couldn’t comprehend how broad his perspective was.

Right then, sounds of hoofs stomping the ground came from behind. Noticing the sound Ikta lifted Kusu and its lamp on his head to send out signals, which made the incineration division’s leader at the front leave the troops and rode there on horse.

“I have just come back, were you two eating?”

“You have worked hard, Yatori. Your portion is in the basket as well, come back to eat

after you leave the horse….”

“You guys sure looks to be enjoying yourselves.”

Ikta’s sentence was interrupted, with fatigued faces, Matthew and Torway walked there from the direction of the headquarters. Wherein the youth with a few extra pounds with embittered look, stared at the three.

“Especially you, Ikta! Don’t run away from the Captain’s nagging alone, put yourself in our shoes whom got told off with your portion as well!”

“That’s so regrettable, Matthew, I thought I could understand your feelings better than anyone else. Are we not best friends?”

“Did you know? Each time you speak of best friends, the meaning it represents diminish. Now the its value should be so light it could make balloons afloat huh?”

“The dinner earlier truly was bad for our stomach…. let’s drink tea together to clear our mouths.”

Everybody approved of Torway’s idea. However, just when Yatori was about to go leave the horse, panicked screams from the soldiers stationed at the front of the camp reverberated through the base. The person running at the forefront shouted with a sharp voice:

“Ene…Enemy attack! Someone, come help engage! Please!”

The field became noisy in an instant. Before their voices could be buried by the growing chaos, Ikta promptly shouted to the tent their troops were resting.

“Platoon Ikta! Platoon Matthew! Platoon Torway! Take up your arms and assume formation in front of the tents! Fast!”

The soldiers who have heard of the orders rushed out of the tent one after another, like the

rollcall they previously had, they assumed formation in front of the tent. The three columns formed by the soldiers' reflex condition were lead to their respective leaders following the light signals Ikta sent by waving Kusu around, and ran to the sides of the three. At the same time, Yatori too called over her cavalry unit.

"Yatorishino's cavalry platoon will standby in situ! Wait for my instructions!"

Ikta handled the situation relying on the analytical skill he was born with, Yatori and Torway too started moving almost at the same time, Matthew and Haro were a breath later in keeping up. As reaction speed goes, their troops could be said to be exceptional.

"–Captain! Enemy attack, please give instructions!"

After rushing into the tent, Yatori immediately tried to get the orders from the superior inside. The fourth instructor who got the power to command them– Captain Nikafuma ran out of the tent and stared with livid face the front of the camp where reports of enemy attack were coming.

"How is this possible, hasn't this area long been under our control… enemies… where are the enemies?"

"This is a night raid Captain, I'm afraid the enemy is attacking without using lights and it would be really difficult to identify them with naked eye."

"Is… is that so… that makes sense… at the front of the camp are stationed the guarding troops, if we leave it to them…"

The field was set to be in a rectangular formation, the length from left to right was short side whist the long one was from front to rear; in order not to block the line of sight from front to rear, the tents were longitudinally aligned. In addition to that, the front also had a space left for engaging battle, in such situation they had to pull up a defensive line and meet the enemy there.

"Then our troops will wait armed behind the engaging point. This way we could guard the sides from enemy assaults, and at the same time be ready to support in case the front was to collapse, how does this sound?"

Ikta gave up on the competences of Captain Nikafuma and had made a specific proposal.

"Ugh…yeah, right, that's good. No matter what don't let them get close to the headquarters and the field hospital."

"About that, what should we do regarding the field hospital? We have to take into consideration all scenarios…"

"That…that's right, we must have them be prepared to quickly evacuate at given order…. You are Warrant Officer Haroma right? Good, go immediately to the field hospital and tell that to the person in charge."

After nodding, Haro started to run. The others too looked like they didn't have any more business with the Captain and returned to their troops. Next, they moved the soldiers as instructed, assumed battle formation behind the battlefield at the front of the camp and formed a second line of defense.

"I… I say, Ikta… although you said that earlier but is it really the best for us not to join the

forces in fight? Isn't it basic knowledge to converge forces?"

"It's really chaotic at the front, if we were to merge our forces because we are in a hurry, then our troops would be affected too. Right now calmly overlooking the situation from behind is the smartest choice. Also if we were to join with allied forces, the command would be transferred to their captain as well."

As they were more and more forced into dangerous situations, Ikta's desire to keep the decisional and acting right and responsibility to himself increased as well. Matthew thought that was the key difference that separate him from normal people… Because generally in such situation you would want to push responsibilities onto someone else.

"Then Ikta, our temporary supreme commander is decided to be you huh?"

"It seems so. Although you too were an option, but if possible a cavalry such as yourself would want to be in charge of offensives right? Which is why you would be more suitable for that than me who prefers to move as little as possible."

"Heck, I even displayed such hope on my face? I should also try to be more low profile."

Seeing the two who were boldly smiling and joking around, with such talent in maintaining calmness right before facing enemies, made Matthew stare at them feeling incredulous. Even Torway felt like that.

As screams and roars coming from afar reached his ears, his hands gripping the air gun started to tremble. His emotions could not keep up with the rapid change of going from normality to war. Just the thought of how he was about to shoot at enemies made him unable to stop his feet. Although this was not the first time he has killed, the feeling of doing something irreparable had not changed.

Without waiting for them to be prepared, the battle moved to the next stage. In Ikta's field of view a large amount of silhouettes seemed to be running back disorderly from the front. He widened his eyes in the darkness trying to identify them– those are not enemies but allies. Was their rear attacked when they returned from the supply mission? If so, then enemies should still be following from behind.

"Not good, the formation has scattered. From the look of it the enemies and allies from the back will mix in together"

Yatori, seeing the same scenery, commented. The next moment, Ikta turned and shouted to his troops.

"…. All infantry troops, equip bayonets!"

While they followed the order, on the face of the soldiers emerged a 'has it finally come?' face.

Air guns were fitted with bayonets while crossbows were embedded with short spears making preparation for a bayonet charge complete.

Tl note: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charge_%28warfare%29

Ikta chose the timing which would not make the soldiers restless and issued the next order:

"Warrant Officer Torway, Warrant Officer Matthew, without orders the troops are not

allowed to load ammo! In order to avoid hitting the retreating allied troops, it is forbidden to fire for now!”

In this case ‘ammo’ was a military slang, it indicated all types of long range projectiles– which mean it included crossbow arrows and wind mortar shells. Although the air gunners paled up when their ‘advantage of distance’ was taken away, however they trusted their commanders would not leave this adverse matter alone.

“Illumination division of platoon Ikta, prepare for light strike! Set your partners on the cross bow and after coordinating with the orders fire the high beam at maximum brightness! After that start an all-out assault, aim for those few idiot units that rushed too much to the front and separated from group! Absolutely avoid hitting friendly units because you are too nervous!”

Ikta paused there for a moment and finally gave instructions to Yatori who was on the horse:

“Yatorishino’s cavalry platoon will maintain the position and take care of those who slips through the net! However, after the battle starts you will calculate the right timing and give orders to charge in and take care of the enemy in one fell swoop. After that deploy guerrilla tactics at the discretion of platoon leaders…That’s all!”

After finishing giving orders, Ikta once again faced the enemy while at the same time installed the short spear and Kusu on his crossbow. After adding the spirit’s weight made beam equipment lose efficiency in melee combat, however especially in night battles, the advantage of illuminating any direction at will is greater than everything. All troops were ready, the next was waiting for an opportunity. At that moment– Matthew throttled close to Ikta and while keeping his head down asked a question:

“…Ikta, I know it is shameful, but can I ask a question?”

“Matthew, my best friend, you can ask me whatever you want.”

Then the youth with slightly plump body swallowed the worthless feeling of asking such a question and opened his mouth:

“…What do I have to do to be able to keep being calm like you…?”

While Matthew was speaking, he had his thumb firmly pressed into the center of his palm, and was trying to get his body to stop trembling. A short distance away, the figure of Torway nervously pacing back and forth could also be seen.

Ikta, after seeing the condition of the two, stretched his arm around the neck of the slightly plump youth and with a low volume whispered into his ear:

“…. Let me tell you a story Matthew. Long, long ago, there were two generals.”

“…..?”

“One was a brave general, he always fought off enemies with a smile; the other was cowardly, he never fought a disadvantageous battle. At a certain banquet the cowardly general asked the courageous one: ‘What do I have to do to not fear war?’ hearing this question the brave general with no sarcasm, sincerely asked back: ‘I on the other hand really want you to tell how to be like you, how can you maintain calmness even in those

hellish situations?.' the cowardly general could not answer– during the following war the courageous general fell to a nameless soldier."

"……."

"Directly facing your own cowardice, while also trying to improve. This time you are already calm enough, Matthew– You do not need to worry, you will stop trembling the moment the battle starts."

Ikta convincingly asserted so and patted on his shoulder– Matthew just silently nodded, perhaps he became relatively calmer, he then turned back to his own troops.

After moving away his gaze from the friend's back, Ikta once again focused on the front. The soldiers fleeing passed from their sides–

These were people from the army. However, just as Yatori has said, amid the battlefield it must already be in a state of chaotic mixture between allies and foes.

The soldiers who charged to the front of the camp in high spirit to fight the enemy got surprised and scared, they could not elaborate a decision to engage close quarter and ended up watching from the sidelines. Looking at that it would have been better if they just let them go through instead of staying in the middle like a sieve.

In other words, right now–being in front of the field hospital which was filled to the brim and the headquarters, the remaining defense was only their own units.

"…. Platoon Ikta, aim at the front with your partners."

A particularly large group of people rushed to them. They could see enemies raising the Kukri blade reflecting the moonlight among people wearing military outfits. The youth forcefully sucked air into his lungs–and then…

"–Irradiate!"

Following the order dozens of light spirits released their high beam at maximum output. The darkness was dispersed by the yellow light, the people whose vision was blinded by the intense brightness naturally raised their hands to cover their eyes and stood in place. Grasping this golden opportunity where no matter allies or foes all were equally defenseless….

"Charge!"

The unleashed soldiers released a violent roar and fiercely struck at the immobile prey.

The short spears' tip penetrated chests, the sharp edge of bayonets cut into necks. Three soldiers forming a group each cut down an enemy, then stepping on the dead enemies' body they moved on to the next target.

Although the greatest advantage comes for a few seconds the light was cast, however as long as they were fighting in light, the effect of blurred vision will last for many minutes, taking advantage of this short time frame to take care of the enemy was a must. To archieve maximum efficiency, they had to form three man groups and push forward. The soldiers, while giving a pat on the shoulder of the friendly units running back, slashed the back of the enemies who happened to be nearby. This battle could not be called a fight anymore, it was a straight forward massacre, there was no room for mercy.

“Lights off! …We managed to get through the first wave! Torway, Matthew reset and group back here!”

Ikta remained indifferent and with merciless words kept directing the effective killing. Of course he too participated in battle, utilizing the time he used to ascertain the status of the battle, he dealt a fatal blow to the Shinaak warrior groaning at his feet by piercing through his eye socket with the short spear.

“P-Platoon Matthew, two lightly wounded, no damage to the main unit!”

“Platoon Torway, three lightly wounded, will not affect the operation!”

After the report of the two Platoon leader Ikta nodded while getting rid of the blood on his short spear.

“Good, well done… Our fleeing troops seems to have gotten behind us, you are now allowed to fire. I am afraid the next wave will be the enemy’s main unit, they may not fall for the same trick again, do not expect to be able to attack while they are under of inhibited vision.”

Thus Ikta had his subordinates assume formation for a light strike, Matthew and Torway too had their men fed bullets into their air guns.

However, when they had just put some distance, the enemy suddenly fired shots. The bullets swept at their sides making a chill run back at both of their spines.

The light strike of the illumination division also had its risks. The enemy was not assuming line formation that could make up the accuracy with firing density, furthermore they were in total darkness and shooting randomly which was why in this case they wouldn’t just be hit by stray bullets. However, it would be another story after the light strike revealed the position of the troops. The enemy bullets would be concentrating in the direction source of the light and it would be impossible for the soldiers to fend it off.

“I will leave the front to you two– Suuya! We will use cross illumination! I will count on you for the left wing!”

“Yes, Sir!”

After separating into two groups, platoon Ikta ran left and right and assumed position behind the trees used as covers– The light strike did not necessarily have to be frontal, there were also uses such as aiming from a safe zone and striking with both sides.

“Irradiate!”

The beams from left and right exposed the figures of Shinaak warriors in a corner of the night. They obliviously fired back at the light sources, but Ikta and others already have taken cover behind the trees. Although the effect of hampering the vision was low, but under these circumstances it was not an issue. Because….

“”Fire!””

Matthew and Torway’s air gunner units, who were embattled right in front of the enemy, already grasped their position from Ikta’s earlier beams and proceeded to attack. Facing the uniform shooting from a rock solid formation, the enemies at the front collapsed one after another.

“Good, it’s time to clear things up– Go Yatori!”

Ikta started flashing the high beam to the rear to send signals, receiving the instruction the Yatorishino Igsem cavalry platoon charged forward as if they could hardly wait. They were separated into two groups and rendezvoused after passing to the left and right of platoon Matthew and platoon Torway rearranging into neat columns in the short distance.

“Ready your swords! We first break through the middle to cut off the enemy then turn back and wipe them out!”

They too had a good grasp of the enemy’s position after the earlier cross illumination. To the enemy who had already suffered a major blow from the shootings of air gunners, the appearance of charging cavalry was the embodiment of despair.

The cavalry’s great speeds and massive blows mercilessly ravaged them. The charging horses crushed bones, the short spears in the riders’ hand pierced torsos one after another.

Once there is an opportunity for cavalry units to get close, the enemy wouldn’t have any mean to stop their charge. By the stormy charge they were separated into two halves, their fate afterward was subjected to a pincer attack by the air guns shooting from the front and the cavalry from the back.

“Yeah, this is over.”

Ikta watching the scenery which was mostly settled up said so without showing emotions. Soon after once he saw the enemy could no longer form organized resistance, he joined up with the half team left previously in Suuya’s care and moved next to Torway and Matthew’s units and joined in shooting.

In the end, of the more than one hundred twenty people the enemy had, seven tenths died, two tenths escaped and the remaining one tenths were captured alive and became prisoners of war. Of the units commanded by Ikta who were at about the same numbers, although eight were wounded, however their injuries were all light.

Killing a hundred enemies while only getting eight injured. Even one were to consider in the factor of luck, but still this destructive power was way too abnormal. The black haired youth who produced such result barely mentioned his victory, but facing the soldiers looking at him with eyes full of expectation and reverence he casually said these words once:

“It was easier than expected right? If we get nasty jobs, we just have to get the knack of how to handle it.”

***

After the whole platoon was accommodated in the high ground base, Kanna spent several days is guarding shifts and transmitting orders, when she was free she also had to take care of Private Yazan whose physical condition quickly deteriorated to one that often made him feel unwell.

Of course they kept being vigilant but this time around the actual battles temporarily did

not occur, her emotions were also left a bit of margin. Perhaps it was because of this– Kanna remembered the incredible youth she had only met twice before the war broke out.

"…I wonder how is that guy doing"

Kanna muttered so while she had the junior sit down at a corner of the camp while she wiped his face with her wet handkerchief. Probably because he heard her words, Private Yazan turned his pale face toward Kanna.

"…. Who are you referring to?"

"Huh? Ah… oh…. It's just a person I know… He is a weird guy too, at our first meeting he suddenly started to call me his junior apprentice."

A smile was brought back to her face when she recalled those memories. Private Yazan who stared blankly at Kanna's actions, opened his mouth and asked:

"…. Lance Corporal Kanna, is there anyone you are interested in?"

This sudden question made Kanna stiffen, Private Yazan reflecting on his words shook his head.

"I apologize, that question was too abrupt. My brain feels groggy…but that… how to say…."

"….. How to say?"

"Because I feel like Lance Corporal Kanna you would be a great mother, compared to the army you are more suited to be in a family environment."

Hearing this unexpected evaluation, Kanna turned her back to her junior in order to hide her embarrassment.

"A family huh… but it's precisely because I was driven out by my family in law that I joined the army."

"Eh…?"

"After my marriage, my husband soon passed away because of illness, I didn't even have the time to conceive a child….as result wouldn't I who married into them lose my place to fit in? Thus I decided to leave, I also got travel fees paid and my favorite book as parting gift. The problem was I couldn't go back to my poor maiden family, when I did not know how to keep making a living and found myself cornered coincidentally I saw the Imperial Army's recruitment poster."

If that time there wasn't a vacancy of air gunner, or Kanna's partner wasn't a wind spirit then perhaps her fate would have been different. In any case, she has chosen the military in order fill her stomach. Since then she used her healthy body that never got ill as a weapon and struggled till now.

"…. So you were married…."

"Yeah~ it's because I was a kid from poor family. After reaching fourteen years old, raising me was became an economic burden so they immediately kicked me out after deciding who to stick me to…. It's only, even I did not expect something like that would happen right after I got married."

Facing Kanna who was wryly smiling while talking about her past story, Private Yazan restlessly bowed his head.

“…. I’m sorry it was really insensitive of me.”

“Don’t worry, after all my personality is not one that get bothered by the past.”

Even after she had said, Private Yazan was still crestfallen, because her words sounded like she was overexerting. After thinking for a while, Kanna decided to smooth things over in another way.

“About that…although I was sent away I still have fond memories of my family in law.”

“….?”

“That household had a huge study room. Or perhaps it should be called library? Anyway for a personal collection it should be considered on a remarkable scale. I heard my husband inherited them from his collector grandfather, it had classic works to novels, cobbled up together with a variety of types and had no organization at all. Since I was taught words, I spent the time I was not doing housework there. Especially <Records of Grand Arfatra> I found it to be great book, in it is meticulously described the time the author spent living with the Shinaak tribe, it was even more entertaining than poorly written novels. Yeah I was really happy back then….”

Kanna lifted her gaze from Private Yasan who could not really understand and recalled the atmosphere of that room filled with the smell of books…. That place was filled with unknown worlds, it even made her frustrated to be kicked out before she even finished going through half of the collection. And most importantly that place made Kanna understand the joy of ‘Seeking Knowledge’.

“…If it’s that guy, will he teach me more of it? About that Science….”

If it really was going to happen that would be great, Kanna though. She found a reason she could strongly pray to, for this she must get back alive.

“…. Lance Corporal Kanna you really do love books.”

“Yes, a lot. Basically if its content is something I don’t know about, any book would be fine.”

Seeing Kanna nodding with a smile Private Yazan scratched his cheek with his finger.

“…. Next time let me gift you a book you like. Because of how I am always troubling you, consider it a present in return.”

“Eh? I’m really happy but…. books are quite expensive, are you sure about it?”

“Is that so? ….. But during the first battle you saved my life, so the least I could do is to pay a price equivalent to my life. If it were to cost more than that then I could only ask you to give up.”

Since he recovered to a point he could joke around, Private Yazan stood up patting his knees. However, the next instant felt headaches– he desperately tried to keep control of his weak legs and tried to show he was alright in front of his senior.

Kanna, holding her hand to her chest, sighed in relief as the result of him trying to flaunt.

However–

“Alert! Alert! Confirmed enemy presence at four o’clock! All personnel move to battle position!”

The two’s short resting time came to an end by the sharp noise of the ringing alarm.

***

“…. I say Suuya. Our job this time was a delivery mission to the frontlines right?”

“Yes, you are correct. If you need it, I could repeat the details.”

“I know you have a reliable memory. But my question now wasn’t about that, instead– ”

Ikta sneaked the binoculars out from behind the rock and peered at the other side of the wide angled mountain road. The scenery that could be seen after hundreds of meters of ramp was the three trenches reinforced with wood and mud-bricks with shadows of Shinaak tribe guards holding air guns with one hand and with alert eyes monitoring the surrounding.

“–What do we have to do in the case the delivery post had already been captured by the enemy?”

Ikta, with a face like he had enough of it already, made this conclusion. Anyway the reconnaissance he was ordered to has finished so he decided to lead the soldiers back from the same route they came from. While being careful not letting out any noises, they spent ten minutes going down the mountain road, the main transporting units were waiting for them below there.

“I went to ascertain of the situation. Unfortunately, the post in front of us has really been taken by the enemy.”

Lieutenant Niger’s mouth twisted as he heard the report. He was the fifth superior Ikta had after coming to the northern region, but if we were to talk about his lack of patience to cope with unfavorable situations he without a doubt ranked first in history.

“…. approximately how many were the enemy’s numbers?”

“As the enemy was located at the top of the slope we couldn’t ascertain their presence within the base. However, we earlier received info that two of our platoons were allocated there, if we consider the layout of the fort and thinking in reverse from there, I guess the enemy’s number should be more than two platoon.”

“Don’t go saying random estimations! Why don’t you go carefully investigate that with your own eyes!”

Lieutenant Niger’s hysterical yelling fell on Ikta’s deaf ears. He was the kind to rage whenever he was in a bad mood, how could Ikta deal with that every time.

“Damn those Shinaak tribe barbarians…. this way we can’t deliver the supplies to the frontline!”

“This was the enemy’s purpose huh? I believe we have to take radical countermeasures in order to maintain a viable supply route.”

“Warrant Officer Yatorishino, you are speaking out of place, it’s an act of transgression! That kind of issue would be tackled by the main headquarter back at the fort!”

Yatori bowed and apologized for being rude. Differently from Ikta who had already half given up to reason with this superior, no matter how many times she was told off, she didn’t stop trying to counsel. This revealed the difference in the two’s personalities.

“In conclusion if we don’t break through here we can’t accomplish our task, and retreating is out of question!”

“The terrain is unfavorable to us, if we do a frontal assault I predict we will suffer a quite serious blow.”

“Didn’t I say you are talking too much?! …. First we must grasp of the enemy’s numbers.”

Lieutenant Niger thought for a moment and then issued the command:

“Warrant Officer Ikta, Warrant Officer Matthew. I order your units to go on firepower reconnaissance. Have skirmishes with the enemy and derive the enemy’s force from actual experience.”

Are you kidding?! Ikta though. The firepower reconnaissance approach was as saying ‘let’s first have a battle to measure the enemy’s strength’, not only such practice would put the troops performing it under huge risks it also will definitely end victims. Since retreating appears to be out of question then it would be better to just throw in all troops from the beginning, the act of wasting soldiers’ lives for useless reasons was intolerable.

“…Uhh~ Lieutenant, I have just reported this, if we take into consideration they have enough soldiers, it would then be about two platoons. Even if we were to go to firepower reconnaissance, under unfavorable conditions sending the same number of men is not a good strategy.”

“Shut up, I already gave the order.”

“…. Then can we at least have Warrant Officer Torway’s unit as support? First the presence of air gunner troops as back up would change the pressure a lot. I won’t let them become a target.”

“That’s enough–”

“I volunteer! Please let us go Lieutenant!”

Torway emphatically intruded in the discussion, Lieutenant Niger looked at him with a stiffened face.

“Are you people not planning to respect orders! How could we fight war in this condition! Listen well, the so called army is–”

“I will defeat the enemy in one hour. How about it, Lieutenant?”

Ikta interrupted at the perfect moment. Hearing him blurt out those words made the Lieutenant temporally speechless.

“If you leave this to me, Matthew and Torwas’s three platoon we will in exactly one hour take back that fort, and we won’t incur in heavy casualties. This is a lot better that firepower reconnaissance right?”

Ikta declared so with an approach so full of confidence that it could be considered weird. Lieutenant Niger originally intended to yell ‘What nonsense are you talking about!’, but seeing the face of the youth with no fear nor cowardice he decided to go the other way– for this kind of person, it’s better to have them experience tragic failures early on.

“…Since you are bragging to this extent, then do as you wish. However, don’t forget the reality that you are refusing an order you were given, if you were to fail, you bunch… especially Warrant Officer Ikta, don’t think you will keep living as servicemen.”

Lieutenant Niger who spoke those words thought that was the greatest threat, however to the recipient it was taken as reward instead. Because of the temptation, Ikta had to suppress his urge to intentionally fail.

“The great I solemnly understand…. Then Warrant Officer Ikta Sorlok will temporally have command right over the three platoons, and will now attack the enemy’s defensive post.”

Ikta doing a salute that carried no respect at all, took his companions and once again went up the mountain road. The moment they left the team, Matthew immediately started a series of inquisitive questions:

“Ikta why would you……! Capturing those trenches under an hour is just reckless!”

“There’s no problem Matthew, my friend. I already decided on the course of action. If it goes smoothly the actual combat won’t last more than twenty minutes, isn’t that right, Ikemen?”

“…. Yeah. If Ikkun had the same idea as me, then I don’t think we will need to spend so much time. However, to archieve that, the units’ placement will be crucial.”

Hearing Torway point out the important stuff, Ikta replied with a light nod. After reaching halfway from the trenches he halted the march and shifted his gaze diagonally above, toward the left. The mountain road they were in was in spiral shape, which is why to their right side was a sharp angled downslope while at their left, a steep upslope.

“Can you see there where the terrain forms a lateral protrusion? It’s vertically climbing thirty meters from here. Although I only have visual estimation, I think it is at the same elevation as the enemies’ trenches…. So following the curvature of this road, that protruding position also continues to extend forward for a while.”

“…So that’s how it is, as a result of that you would get a straight trajectory. What is the approximate final distance from the enemy?”

“It should be a little more than one hundred fifty meters. But considering the foothold width, at prone shooting it only has space to accommodate three people in one row.”

“So we can’t bring many men…. I understand, including me I will choose six people from my platoon.”

Ikta and Torway continued discussing, while Matthew, whose understanding couldn’t keep

up, was left behind. Shortly after four air gunners were picked up and together with platoon leader Torway gathered in front of Ikta.

“We will depart when your figures disappear behind the protuberance, after that we will begin the attack in exactly five minutes. You will need twenty minutes to climb up the wall, then take the five minutes to set up in a good position. This also includes the time to readjust your breathing, Torway there is no issue about this right?”

Torway once again evaluated their current position to the protrusion and then heavily nodded.

“Good, then you can start climbing. Make me a favor and don’t get spotted by the enemy.”

After getting Ikta’s permission, six people, including Torway, grabbed the ivies and roots and started climbing. Matthew, as he nervously watched their figures leave, once again pressed Ikta:

“Oi! What kind of strategy is this? Are you planning for Torway to provide covering fire while we do a frontal assault?”

“More or less that, are you anxious? Matthew.”

“You are asking if I am anxious?! I am totally fully anxious! You too know that the effective shooting range of air guns is at most forty meters right? That’s right, maybe Torway is able to hit something twenty meters farther away but even that way it only makes sixty meters…. Then how far from the enemy you said those five will be positioned?”

“By visual alone I’d say a bit more than one hundred fifty.”

“There you have the problem! From a place one hundred fifty meters away from the enemy how could they perform an effective covering fire?! Not one shot will hit! Furthermore, there are only six people, even the tactic of using high density shooting to compensate for hit rate is not viable!”

Matthew getting to the point stopped talking and stared at Ikta, he however with expression of heartfelt admiration applauded.

“Thank you for clearly stating the main points. Since long ago I felt that you were very good at explaining to others in an easy way what you couldn’t understand.”

“Your words are totally not praises! That is because your actions are always incomprehensible to others!”

“Okay, okay, calm down. It is true that during the previous battle it was very difficult to see the differences…. but if what I ordered before was truly something impossible then Torway too wouldn’t have simply agreed to it, right?”

With only this sentence Ikta blocked further questions from Matthew, he then revealed a bold smile while looking up the wall.

“–While we were having this conversation, they had already climbed to a relatively high position. Matthew it’s almost time to let the soldiers load the bullets. After they are done, have them mount the bayonet too, because this time we are going with a full scale attack from the beginning.”

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The moment enemy columns appeared on their field of vision caused immediate reaction from the warriors of the Shinaak tribe who were guarding the trenches seized from the empire, no, the correct wording would be the trenches they took back, they had already prepared for the next confrontation.

“…The enemy, they have come! Quickly ready the artillery!”

Everyone started moving at the leader’s orders, as expected in this fortress their main power still relied on the wind mortars with the addition of gravity. Every trench had two openings and in total six artilleries were set up. The ones tasked for operating the wind mortars quickly rushed to the position they were responsible for.

Although the wind mortars here were of a smaller type, however, for it to function properly it still needed four wind spirits to power and three people to maneuver. After the wind spirits were set up, shells too were loaded, they reached the condition to be able to fire at any time should the orders be given.

“Okay, we are ready! Do we fire?”

“Do not rush! Wait till they get a bit closer!”

The leader calmly waited. Since the shell speed of wind mortars are not great, even if was within the firing range, there was the probability of the enemy dodging if it was too far away. Since the number of shells were limited, they had to fire with the best possible efficiency–this was the knowledge imparted to them by the instructor.

“The distance is two hundred fifty, two hundred forty, two hundred thirty…… two hundred…. good, right now– Gah!”

Just as the leader was about to issue the order, his body fell backward. No, he was not the only one unlucky enough to be the recipient of a surprise attack, in every trench an artillery troop suffered the same fate. Some were leaking fresh blood from the chest, some were leaking from the eyes, but the one thing in common was all were lying motionless on the ground.

“What…! Wh-what happened–”

“It’s gunshots! From where, the guys in front of us clearly are not holding guns– Guh!”

Before they could understand the situation two more fell. The Shinaak tribe warriors who had lost their leader were shaken–

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“First trench, artillery unit hit. Down for a chest wound.”

Twenty meters above Ikta, three air gunners including Torway were prone on the naturally

formed protruding eaves of the terrain and sniped at their targets.

“Bullets loaded– trench one, the target is the male on the left. Ready, aim… shoot!”

The slight sound of compressed air exploding echoed. The acorn shaped bulled shot from the muzzle travelled one hundred fifty meters and hit the solar plexus of the man who was desperately trying to lift up one of the fallen companion.

“–Trench two, the enemies are in cover. Prioritize sniping the spirits to get rid of the artillery. Ready, aim… shoot!”

As the sentence finished, triggers were pulled. Behind the three who were actually shooting, there were the same number of people looking through binoculars with lowered body stance. They had four tasks: confirm hits, correct the trajectory based on the results, protect the shooters–and if the case were to call for it, substitute them.

“Trench three, the newly appeared artillery target was hit. It’s a minor wound to the arm, try a follow up.”

“Trench one, no more enemy presence detected, judged to be temporally suppressed. Change to supporting trench two”

They were so quiet that it was scary, the sniping mission was performed with machine-like mindset. That was also natural. Right now they didn’t feel the threat of nearby enemies, as such they also did not need to muster the courage to face such threat. Doing a unilateral shooting from one hundred fifty meters away, this sort of stuff has already become simple gestures.

“… our force is beginning the frontal assault. All snipers maintain the status quo and continue with covering fire.”

Torway’s ordered with ice cold tone, as if he was another person. He then aimed at the next target, very easily adjusted taking into consideration gravity and ‘the distance from the target’, and pulled the trigger.

帝国式施条風銃試作版
全長 1.2m
重量 4.7kg
必中射程 200～250m
最大有効射程 400m以上

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“The annoying artillery has quieted down huh– good, Charge!”

After estimating the right timing, Ikta and Matthew’s units launched an all-out attack. Including the main force of Torway’s platoon, over one hundred soldiers rushed into the enemy trenches. The battlefield was filled with roars.

“Suuya! Cross illumination! Destroy the enemy’s vision!”

“Yes, Sir!”

Being next to the charging troops with raised bayonets, the illumination troops released the supporting high beam. Part of the enemies distorted their eyes due to the blinding light, weakening their ability to react, taking advantage of this, platoon Matthew took the lead and stormed into the trench.

“”””Whoaooaoaoaoa!”””””

Melee battle spread through the narrow trenches. The soldiers cut the head of enemies who didn’t even have time to fit the bayonet, or pushed them down and stabbed their chest with the short spear. Some were howling like beasts, there were also those wailing like babies, at that moment everyone was putting all their focus on how to keep surviving on the abnormal setting that was the “Battlefield”.

“Stop….Please…Help me!”

“…Guh!”

However even in these abnormal situation one could occasionally feel the ripples of normality. The female soldier who threw away her weapon and was asking to be spared was such an example. If the one they were facing were not carried away by the bloodlust, they would be affected and momentarily hesitate whether to strike.

Right now Matthew was in such predicament but in this case it resulted in adverse consequences. Grasping the moment his fighting will wavered, as he was lowering his blade the female Shinaak soldier who was originally pleading jumped over.

“Whoa…! Y-You…!”

Her fingers grasped Matthew’s thick neck, with a grip strength unlike that of a girl she sank her nails into his skin, the woman was being serious. With eyes like beast pushed to a dead end she used all her strength attempting to empty-handed tear his carotid artery.

“Ugh…uugh…Some-Somebody fast–”

The reaper’s footstep was getting closer to Matthew who started having trouble breathing because of the blocked airways. Due to the brain hypoxia*, even the cry for help didn’t come out.

Tl note: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypoxia_%28medical%29

Just as his vision was starting to be tainted with red– he saw the female soldier widen her eyes to the limit, then the hands strangling his neck lost strength and her whole body went

limp on Matthew.

“Huff…! Cough…Cough, cough… Huff…!”

“You alright Matthew? That won’t do you know, in places like this you can’t go thinking of other things beside killing.”

Ikta, after kicking away the female soldier’s body extended his hand to the friend. Matthew while getting up with his help, looked with teary eyes at the woman– a pinky finger sized hole on the back of her head proved how she already lost her life.

“Cough Cough…S-Sorry, you really saved me there…”

“The one you need to thank is not me but Torway. Seeing clearly two people fighting from 150 meters and then with pinpoint accuracy shoot one of them, of all the people in the world this was something probably only he could have pulled off.”

As Ikta was speaking, he moved his gaze and looked outside the trench. Matthew too, while trembling, stared at the same direction, but with a distance of 150 meters, he couldn’t even spot the figure of the friend.

His mood moved past gratefulness and instead started to cause fear– did he really just got saved from such distance?

“…Good, we should be done with all trenches now. There is no need to force yourselves to chase fleeting enemies but you must check if there are enemies hiding. Ensuring the safety before noticing the main unit to come is an extremely important job.”

Seeing the battle has come to an end, the youth immediately begun to compositely give post-battle orders. Matthew, while helping, was anxiously waiting for the explanation that would come.

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Back in time to a few months before, the place was the central military base of the Empire.

The sound of exploding compressed air was something everyone present was used to hearing, however now many were covering their ears because of the emitted noise.

“…Oioi, is this real?”

A second shot, third, forth, shots were continuously fired. Each time it did, the commotion grew larger and the everyone’s surprise begun to gradually become oblivious.

Behind the shooter participating in the experiment were gathered more than twenty coworkers. This was not a spectacle even those who have long worked in this department would often see.

“…The one hundred shoots are done. Hey, how are the results?”

“P-Please wait a moment. Uh… since it’s like this… I got it, in the 50 meters shooting the accuracy was 94%. After a rough calculation there is a 500% increase in accuracy compared to previous air guns.”

After getting the concrete numbers, this exaggerated improvement made all preset speechless.

Among the departments present at the central military base the unified military equipment managerial department was one of the many military facility of the Empire. As the name implies, it was a department responsible to development and production of various military equipment headed by the air guns. The new military technology would be first sent here after coming out from the internal researching R&D department.

“To be able to produce such results from just digging some helical groove inside the barred in accordance with Pakda’s blueprint…”

Tl note: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rifling

The summoned researchers were also mixed with the spectators but the one concerned was showing a more surprised face than anyone else.

He recalled the guy, the high grade military cadet who was known as being a “freak” who already went to the north, it was precisely that boy the one who handed him the blueprint of this miraculous new air gun.

It was not like Pakda couldn’t understand design concepts, that piece of blueprint had the conformity to catch the attention of the leading researchers. It made him deem that no matter what were the results, it would be worth trying to make a prototype. It was just even Pakda couldn’t have imagined it would have produced such extreme results.

“Hey you’re amazing, Pakda! Stop be dazing around, you should be happy, this is a great merit!”

“Carving helical grooves inside the barred make the fast travelling bullet rotate at high speed which result in improved ballistic stability and straight shooting…is it? Indeed, after hearing the explanation I too can understand the theory.”

“To devise something like this from scratch, it must be the work of a genius… I admire you, Pakda. I’m truly sorry, to think I didn’t realize you were such an outstanding guy.”

After receiving praises from his colleague one after another, Pakda didn’t know what kind of expression he should show–as how it stands now, it created an atmosphere that prevented him from admitting it was not an invention he himself had thought of.

The thing he was particularly afraid of was how his colleague’s envious eyes would become one of disappointment.

“H-How is the reduction of the projectile speed? Since the grooves were dug in the barrel, it would allow air to leak from the space in groove and the bullet…”

“Oh, in the blueprint it is included the design of an acorn shaped bullet to compensate for it. We should immediately begin the production and experiment on it. Given the current situation, the result seems to be something to look forward to.”

“This is a historic moment…… After all, from today onward, the old air guns the empire air shooters are using will gradually be replaced!”

The unexpected invention drove up the coworkers’ excitement like an ignited flame in the furnace. Pakda felt anxious by thinking of the hectic days that would come– but before

being submerged by that, there was one more thing he has agreed to do.

“…A-About that! Regarding the troops which will first get the prototype, can I advise on that?”

“Eh? Indeed, the allocation of trial equipment at early stage of development is completely entrusted to us of the unified military equipment managerial department…”

“Wait, you have someone who you want to show the results first? Something like a longtime friend… Oh, I bet it’s a woman!”

The colleagues surrounding Pakda were noisily speculating on silly reasons. Inside him, he thought it would be better if it really was like that, but on the surface he calmly stared at the highest ranked department head.

“It’s not like I can’t understand your feelings, however… mixing your private life with job is not a commendable behavior, Corporal Pakda.”

“T-That…”

“Although it is not a commendable behavior… But this time you have archieved a great merit.”

The tone suddenly changed to a gentle one. Pakda who was feeling dejected, lifted his head with surprise only to see a slight smile on the rarely relaxed face of the superior.

“You can point the troops and the commander… Right, write it on the blackboard over there, I will go later to confirm it, although we have to consider the numbers of the unit first, but as soon as we scrap together enough pieces, the first shipment will be to them.”

“–T-Thank you so much!”

Filled with gratefulness, Pakda with the most respectful salute replied to the superior who reverted to his default conduct…But then again, he had totally forgot– forgot that he was originally still hesitating whether or not to reveal the true identity of the author to that blueprint.

Due to this grave forgetfulness, the top military innovation in the empire’s history become entirely his credit. Henceforth, the innovating exploit of “Replacing the old smooth-bore air guns with rifling air gun which would become the new main weapon” will forever be associated together with the name of Pakda Sonnyanai.

Tl note: It’s SonnYanai and not SonnyAnai

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“So, these are the experimental air gun prototypes?”

Yatori asked while looking inside the barrel. Beside Haro who stayed in the rear, all four knights were gathered in the trenches once again taken from the enemy, and were discussing about earlier battle.

“Eh~ Ah~ that’s right~ because of the effect of the rifling carved inside the barrel~ the

effective range~ compared to the old smoothbore air guns~ is increased five or six fold~ it's something that once mass production begins~ will become a new weapon~ that would give rise to revolution of the battlefield~ ”

Torway who couldn't stand Ikta's lack of drive anymore, took his place in explaining.

“My afterthoughts of actually using it is the overall trajectory stabilization is really outstanding. Even using it from more than 100 meters, the impact point would not be susceptible to luck. If I have to find some fault in this, it would be the body became two times heavier… it truly is a revolutionary weapon.”

“So that miraculous long distance shooting was feasible because of this… but even so, to be able to shut six cannons with three shooters alone, it's so mind-blowing that it's hard to believe.”

Matthew pondered with his hands folded on his chest, Torway instead calmly shook his head.

“This was the inevitable result since the effective shooting rage was increased so dramatically. The average rate of fire of wind mortars is one shell per forty seconds, compared to that the air guns' is one round every five second. So in the time the enemy shoots one shell, we could have shot twelve. Since we had such a big margin on time, taking care of the artillery soldiers before the cannon was loaded is completely feasible.”

Although Torway kept it very simple, Matthew was grinding his teeth while thinking… Even with the same equipment, the present him wouldn't be able to archieve that. It was precisely because all the shooters had proficient shooting technique that this result could be reached.

“Is this one of the technology hidden in <Anarai's box>? Even if I heard it from Ikta before, but seeing the actual thing, it's feels really different. The Empire ceded the important person to Kioka huh… No, it would be more correct to say the dreadful person.”

“Yeah~ but you don't have to worry about that. For example, it could be seen from the matter of Empire manufacturing the rifling air guns, old man Anarai don't want military progress to favor any one country. Regarding the disclosure of new technology, that old man upheld the doctrine of passive equilibrium.”

Ikta said so while yawning. Right then Yatori showed an expression as if she thought of something.

“……I say, Ikta. I remember that when we were about to come to the northern region, during the ballistic lecture you insisted on giving a speech about the need to popularize other new technology different from air guns right?”

“Oh, you mean the blast cannon*? Since Kioka has already implemented them, based on that if we see it with the perspective of ‘Technologies the empire need to develop as soon as possible', blast cannon and rifled air guns can be said to be at exactly the same level. However, the cannon uses the same principle of ‘rising air' as in blimps which would come in conflict with the Alderah teachings. On that alone, we couldn't even shield ourselves from the covering fire…. forget it, it's not something we can do about even if we were to vex over it.”

Tl note: Ikta says 爆砲 (ばくほう), literally ‘exploding/explosion cannon’ and my guess is he means the canonic cannon powered by explosion and does not use spirits, the rising air he cited is the same of the one in V1Ch2 (hydrogen and helium) which is highly inflammable

With a snort Ikta changed mood and moved his sight on Torway.

“Oi, Ikemen. The actual combat show has ended, isn’t it about time you tell us your plans?”

“Ah– Yeah, that’s right, there’s no more reason to keeping it secret.”

Torway, as if he was woken up, started his explanation to all present: “With the help of this rifled air gun, in the future the foothold position of air shooters should be able to advance to the next stage. First, in the foreseeable future there would be no more need to have large numbers of soldiers to compensate for the low hit rate, I think the current base unit will be replaced by squads* and spread opportunistic maneuver will substitute in as basic tactic, at least the scenario of shooting at each other on plains will lessen.”

Tl note:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squad

“You mean hiding and sneakily shooting enemies will become mainstream? Although I understand the reasoning, but it’s not a vision of the future I really want to welcome.”

The corner of Yatori’s mouth twisted, this feeling was really consistent with her style and identity of ‘White arm* Igsem’

Tl note:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_weapon

“No, no, Yatori, I think it will depend on which perspective you look at it. After all the infantry motto to date is ‘Keep shooting even if the comrade on your side were to fall’. If we talk about it, that too is a really nasty scenario isn’t it?”

“Hahaha…. perhaps both are just about the same, but humans cannot resist the trend of the times. From the standpoint of a commander of air shooter troops, we first have to adapt to the tactics of the new era, and if the opportunity arises, also promote development. In order to archieve this goal, I thought of establishing a new type of unit called ‘Sniper’”

The substantive that was never heard before aroused the interest of all. The situation was leaving Torway a bit nervous and just as he was about to open mouth and keep explaining– Suuya frantically rushed into the trench.

” I deeply apologize for interrupting your conversation but since the Lieutenant is not present…. Report! A messenger has just arrived from the frontline ahead of here and is asking for rescue!”

Yatori stood up first, her long flaming red hair was swinging and the red eyes shining of fighting spirit.

“Asking for rescue? It sounds to be a very dire situation, call the messenger here.”

“I think he will arrive shortly, however he looked like to be deeply wounded… ah, he is here!”

After clearing the way, another soldier dragging his feel stepped in. His military uniform

was stained red by the blood, furthermore there was a crossbow arrow stuck in his right thigh. It's because of the contraction of the muscle that it couldn't be extracted huh? Just thinking of this unimaginable tragic appearance made the atmosphere become very heavy.

"…I'm officer Higasoz and I belong to the first Shinaak punitive brigade, thirty second air shooter platoon."

"You did a great job bringing the message even when suffering from such deep wounds. Please sit on this chair and try to relax, I will immediately call for medic–"

"Thank you for your concern, but time is precious, please first allow me to give the report."

Officer Higasoz first inspired deeply many time to readjust his disordered breathing and then again opened mouth:

"Our base one day by foot away from here is surrounded by enemies and is currently at risk of falling completely. I think everybody can understand from my appearance alone, just getting a messenger through cost the lives of many soldiers. As things are now, there is no time to hesitate, please send reinforcement as soon as possible… Guh…!"

Right then officer Higasoz, as if he couldn't bear with a headache, lowered his head, after struggling and groaning on the ground like an animal he finally lost consciousness and lied motionless face to the ground. Ikta while telling Suuya to get a medic, kept a severe expression from beginning to end while looking at the condition of the officer.

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The soldiers understood they were in a desperate situation only after the situation was already irreversible.

"Fire!"

Following the anxious order of the commander, the soldiers embattled at the top of the high platform opened fire. Although the target was the swarm of enemies below blocking them, the result was lacking. The reason being the enemy keeping distance at the edge of not suffering serious damage from air gun volleys.

"Lieutenant, this way we can't have a winner! Before our ammunitions runs out we need to break through their encirclement…!"

Although the reasoning of the adjutant was correct, after hesitating, Lieutenant Bellary, the acting commander dejected the proposal. The tragedy he witnessed just a few hours earlier made his heart waver in implementing a breakthrough.

"…. Dismissed! You too should have seen the fate of our comrades who just did that!"

Besieged on all sides, this was the simplest way to describe their current situation.

Around this high ground field base occupied by four empire platoons, were enemies in the lowlands on all four sides deploying an inclusive formation. Even if their troops already outnumbered the empire soldiers, the enemy didn't make the initiative to attack. They only

occasionally exhibited the will to charge in, increasing psychological pressure and basically maintained the encircled status. Moreover, that was already enough.

“But they are waiting for us to exhaust our ammunition! …furthermore in the meantime the supply chain to the frontline has been cut…!”

Interrupt the supply chain, and one after another eliminate the weakened enemy which stopped receiving support from the rear–this was the Shinaak tribe’s tactic. To archieve this goal, they didn’t necessarily need to defeat the enemy, it could be done as long as the enemy doesn’t march out of the relay station. This not only blocks supply to the frontlines, but also makes the surrounded bases gradually get consumed in the isolated battle. Just like the predicament Lieutenant Bellary’s troops has fallen into.

Being on high ground had advantages over the enemies in the lowlands, this was the common sense Lieutenant Bellary had learned in military commanding. Because from a higher elevation they had good visual on the enemy, thus it made easy to react whatever action they should take; And if they were to charge into them, running down the slope would create momentum making it become power.

However, he carelessly forgot, forgot that the place his troops were battling was not a single tower rising on a plain, but in a part of unique mountain area rich of undulating terrain. He also forgot that even if he wanted to break through with a charge, after that, awaiting for them was a steep terrain unsuitable for a smooth march.

In contrast, the Shinaak tribe warriors understood that very well. Which is why when the Empire soldiers charged down from the high platform they didn’t confront them frontally, instead they let the enemy pass through first. Waiting for the moment of hesitation the enemy showed when they reached the dangerous terrain formation, and then they presented their fangs. Followed by impeccable preparations, they mercilessly devoured the unprepared backs.

“Even if we can break through this encirclement, the following terrain will not allow a safe retreat…Now that I think about it, an abandoned high ground base was obliviously a trap, not catching on it was my mistake.”

“Lieutenant……”

“Strengthen your will, Sargent Ikshini. It seems we can only fight a protracted battle”

Waiting for a judgemental error from the enemy, or the arrival of allied reinforcement, since they already lost the retreat route, Lieutenant Bellary was psychologically prepared for a complete siege battle.

On the other hand, Lance corporal Kanna Temari who was at the same base and responsible of engaging the enemy felt fear from the indeed approaching ambiance of ruin.

Since the moment she saw the surrounding terrain she had this unjustifiable ominous presentiment. However, Kanna was unable to poke deeper into her intuition until the feelings became truth. As an infantry she never had the education to effectively capitalize onto those feelings.

“Squad leader! The range of air guns are not enough…! We still can’t use the wind

mortars?”

“We can’t! Mortar shells are even more scarce than bullets! If we waste them now, we would have no means to fight off the enemy in the event they launch an offensive! If we use it, it will be by taking advantage of when they rush to determine the outcome and get careless, that’s our only chance to deal a major blow to the enemy….”

Although he said so himself, watching his attitude, the squad leader wasn’t really keen on the probability of that event. Probably because he thought that the enemy who devised such a thoughtful approach to the offensive wouldn’t commit a last moment mistake right? Kanna also felt the same.

“…Ugh…Then, we have to keep shooting knowing it won’t hit?”

“No, this is a pre-combat operation. If we insist in not using mortar shells, the enemy may suspect we no longer have them. If it was like that the enemy might decide on a charging attack, I think the Lieutenant is counting on that advantage to deal substantial damage to the enemy.”

Kanna moved her focus onto the wind mortars to make sure if ordered, she would be able to immediately go operate it…. Because if they couldn’t just stay put and wait for reinforcement, this tactic would be their last mean to break the status quo.

“Report! The enemy units begun to gather to the north! It’s possible they could directly go on offensive after gathering!”

The scout situated on the northern side of the base, responsible for monitoring enemy’s movement shouted with high volume. The one in command, Lieutenant Bellary, after hearing the report, with a face full of hatred crooked the corners of his mouth.

“Their actions is nine out of ten just trying to shaken us and not to actually planning an attack…”

“Lieutenant….”

“…. However, if we ignore all other possibilities, and got really bad luck, then it will be all over”

Facing the reality that he could only act accordingly to the enemy’s ploy made Lieutenant Bellary grind his teeth, in the end he just rearranged the deployment so more soldiers could be moved to the north edge from other sides. Since they had to move the wind mortars as well, it made the already tided soldiers’ stamina drop even more severely.

“Lance Corporal Kanna! We have to move to the north side! Leave Private Yazan here!”

The squad leader after receiving the orders from Lieutenant Bellary started to move, Kanna as a reflex looked to her junior.

“If something were to happen I will immediately have someone report, please be assured and leave this post to me.”

Since his tone was firmer than she thought would be, Kanna nodded in relief.

“Then I will leave it to you.”

Kanna left the monitoring duty to Private Yazan and together with comrades in the same

squad she started moving the wheel mounted wind mortar. Since at the beginning they were drawn in by horses, to move them now with only arms strength it truly felt quite heavy.

During the time they were pushing the wind mortar, suddenly one comrade fell on his knee and started vomiting followed by another who felt dizzy and sat on the ground.

“Hey! What happened? Pull yourselves together! Quickly push the mortar…!”

Although the squad leader was shouting anxiously, Kanna inadvertently looked around and found–this was not a phenomenon happening only in her squad, but all squads had members suffering from poor health. No, not only that–

“…. When did everybody become so thin…?”

Kanna was rendered speechless. The face complexion could not be called livid anymore but white pale, their skin was dry and cracked, the meager cheeks sunken. Under sunlight doesn’t everybody look like a diseased?

Of course Kanna too was quite tired because of this war lifestyle but she had yet to incur in serious health issues. As things are now, she finally was aware that she was quite lucky. As everyone were become like that, her companion just didn’t escape from that rule.

While Kanna felt a shiver ran down her spine because of noticing this, in another area, Private Yazan who was left to monitoring the west field also experienced and abnormal situation. But he did not believe this abnormal situation was originated from himself.

“….it clearly is daytime then why is it so dark? Did clouds cover the sun…?”

Private Yazan murmured so while under a blue sky with no cloud in sight. In truth the world seen through his eyes indeed appeared to be dim. Furthermore, his symptoms of headache, tinnitus* and nausea also worsened, but he no longer was in the condition to determine these symptoms were all chained together by one condition.

Tl note:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinnitus

The task of monitoring the west side was of course not left to him alone, each squad left one person in charge for the same job. Although it was not ordered by the commander, the personnel choice was based on ‘those with not much stamina left’. In other words, although the enemy’s action must be corresponded by having soldiers running around the base, or pushing the mobile heavy wind mortar—to be excluded from that one had to reach the point of being the weakest soldiers among all.

Not counting him, around Private Yazan were four other soldiers. Some directly lost consciousness while leaning on the wall of the fort; others knelt and threw up whatever was in their stomach; there were even some who started humming because of confusion…. the common trait between them was that they did not have the strength to correctly grasp the reality in front of them anymore

“–Huh…”

In the scenario of him not being able to stop his mind from wandering off, the world slowly devoid of light and even color shown by Private Yazan’s eyes, a fuzzy black silhouette appeared. The perception crisis did not kick in. He was already unclear of where

he was or what situation he was in.

“…Who…are you?”

Even till the moment that arm swung down bringing down a certain 〈 shaped object, Private Yazan offered no resistance at all.

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“Halt!”

Ikta after briefly telling the troops to stop, probed a little bit from behind the rock and observed the situation on the other side.

“Huff…huff…how is it? How do you feel about it? Ikta….”

Matthew asked him while gasping for air. The effort to look for an appropriate route paid off, they reduced the supposed original one-day march by two hours, but of course this fast paced march couldn’t have not brought fatigue to the soldiers.

“There’s no problem if you want to immediately attack, I already obtained the permission from the company commander.”

The one saying this, Yatori, was the exception, her breathing wasn’t disturbed by one bit. Facing her spirit that has not lowered since the war began, Ikta instead could not respond with the command of ‘commence battle’.

“Although those words were encouraging, but there’s no need for them.”

Ikta’s tone kept being very dull, that strongly excluded to ‘show emotions’ because that could shake the soldiers. Because currently, the ‘Science’ that he believes in, was in need of someone who is able to carry on with no emotional attitude.

“The results from scouting were that there’s no friendly activity from within the high base, there’s also no enemy presence in the lowland, in other words– everything is over.”

“We will not proceed with the rescue. For at least the next two days the troops will not move from here”

After entrusting the fainted officer Higasoz to the medic unit and ordering them to send the officer to the rear, Ikta, still keeping a dull tone, told his heartless plan to the companions.

“…. Huh…? Ikkun, what did you just say….”

“I said we will not be going to rescue them. More correctly is we have no means.”

Facing Ikta who made such a cold assertion, of the present, only Yatori could immediately understand his intention. Matthew, Torway and Suuya were focusing the line of sigh mixed with surprise and reproach on him.

“Hey! What’s the meaning of this Ikta! To say we have no mean to rescue them, but we don’t even have a clear understanding of the situation on the other side right? Don’t give

up before even knowing the enemy's numbers!"

"Platoon leader, please let's go help them at once! The soldiers' stamina is not an issue!"

Ikta while facing them and frontally bearing their blame said:

"The issue is not manpower, Matthew; and not stamina as well, Suuya. It's because of other reasons, unless we stay here and prepare for two days first, otherwise we would be incapable of keep moving higher onto the mountain."

The three showed an expression as if they couldn't accept it, suddenly then Yatori decided to point to the heart of the issue.

"…it's to adapt to the altitude right?"

Hearing those words, Ikta closed his eyes and confirmed. The trio stared at him with strong puzzled looks.

"Although I believe nobody has forgot this, but right now we are engaging battle on the Grand Arfatra Mountain range, compared to the altitude we are used to live, the elevation we are risking our lives at is different as day and night… Then if we want to do such whimsical act, then we have to comply to the rules of the highlands."

"Rules of the highland…Ikkun, you mean…?"

"First, you can't suddenly increase the elevation in a short amount of time, especially after reaching 3000 meters– although there are other rules, but currently the main reason for our inability to immediately go on a rescue mission is this."

After estimating when Ikta would finish speaking, Yatori temporally substituted him in explaining.

"I think everyone has experienced this, the more you go up on the mountain, the harder it is to breath. It is said that it's because compared to the plain the air on the mountain is thinner. Then after reaching the highlands the people who used to live on the plain like us will be affected by a series of symptoms caused by the thin air. Including headaches, nausea, loss of appetite, insomnia, swollen limbs, chest tightness and so on– together these are called 'Mountain sickness'"

"If we neglect on the signs the body shows us and keep climbing, then our condition will worsen. Other than the more severe symptoms of what Yatori has said, you will show inability to walk straight, see visual and hear auditory hallucinations, narrowing and darkening of the field of view and others. If you were to lose consciousness, then that mean you are almost dead…So how are you guys feeling about this? Although I admit that I had taken this issue into consideration as far as I could, but showing early symptoms of headache, nausea and chest tightness is also a normal phenomenon."

Matthew and Suuya immediately pressed their chest. Ikta looking at their actions continued:

"Professor Anarai collectively referred to these symptoms as 'Altitude sickness*', it's a hazardous trap lying in the mountains. The iron rule I was taught about climbing is first avoid to fall into this trap. To archieve that the essential step is just as Yatori has mentioned at the beginning 'Acclimate to the elevation'"

Tl note:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altitude_sickness

"……Acclimate to the elevation…."

"Correct, just as it literally says it makes the body adapt to the elevation, at least till the symptoms of 'mountain sickness' no longer appears. When you are over 3000 meters if something like this is not done, it could be fatal. Incidentally the place we are right now is a lot higher than that benchmark."

"In other words, it's to let our bodies adapt to the altitude that for two days we can't move from here…?"

"Right. There's risk in climbing alone, if you also want to fight then it's just looking for death. If you have to agonistically strain your body before it adapts, it will suddenly make the altitude sickness effects a lot worse. What do you think will be the fate of increasingly weak soldiers when facing enemies in battles?"

No one else raised objections, because the result was too easily imaginable.

"Based on the aforementioned, the earliest time we can go on a rescue mission is two days from now, in that time we must do our best and adapt to the altitude. The specific method is to drink twice the average amount of fluids and urinate a lot, while breathing pay attention to do deep abdominal inspiration and while sleeping be careful to keep your body warm and not expose it to the cold."

After finishing talking, Ikta moved his sight away from the others and with a somehow alienated manner announced:

"Of everyone here, the current temporally commander is me right…Assuming that responsibility I decided not to report to Lieutenant Niger about Officer Higasoz's request for reinforcement."

Hearing those words, everyone showed a severe expression, in such situation the youth deeply sighed and once again opened his mouth:

"…how do I say this… I know saying these words is stupid, I also know that you don't want to hear them–but even so, I have to say this is an order, and you must abide."

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"…. There is no ambush set for the rescue. Since our allies were completely destroyed, I thought the possibility of that was quite high."

Yatori said so while she climbed the hill full of bodies from allies and enemies. Since they already sent scouts to survey the interior, they would not fall into enemy's ambushes. On the rear were Matthew and Torway plus Lieutenant Niger's troops in formation, to assure an escape route just in case.

"Maybe it's because the Shinaak also suffered so much damage that they couldn't set ambush anymore… Achoo!"

Following the sneeze, Ikta stepped onto the high platform– that is where the field base was

set. He stopped his feet in the middle of the base and looked around. Yatori who was late by one beat, caught up and showed a stiff expression to the spectacle in her eyes.

Right now the base was filled with the silence of over one hundred casualties from the four platoon and dozens of enemies. The freezing and dryness typical to highlands preserved the bodies from decomposition, those who fell in battle, those who perished in panic, and also those who lost their lives without even realizing it…the way of death was different for everyone. From their body posture and location, one could deduce their last moments as well as how they were trying to fight the inevitable.

"…Although painful but the choice you face might be forced on the battlefield, like whether or not to go and help your companions. Which means you first have to put on the scale and balance the risk and chances of success, then decide whether you will join the battle…"

Yatori murmured so, it was rare to see her show the conflict in her heart.

"The majority of the bodies are within the base, it seems till the end they didn't try the strategy of gathering all troops and trying to break through the encirclement."

Till the last moment of the last man standing, did they believe the reinforcement would arrive and waited? Ikta was convinced that not bringing Matthew and Torway here was the correct decision.

"…However, although we have arrived here, there is almost nothing we can recover. The spirits were all taken away, and at the current stage, even if we wanted to carry the bodies we wouldn't be able to do it."

"Let's collect the tags of commanders who fell in battle and then withdraw."

After reaching a consensus on what to do, the two together with the troops they brought, separated to look for the commanders' corpses.

Ikta moved to the eastern side of the base–while inspecting this zone of the fort, the image two bodies stacked on each other entered his vision.

Just as Ikta was about to inadvertently pass on the sides, a sudden gust of wind made the loosened ribbon from the hair of one body entangled in his feet. However, just as the youth was about to reach and remove the ribbon–a sense of familiarity he didn't want to feel swarmed his mind.

"…Guh–"

The brown ribbon was stained with marks of the owner's blood. Ikta still remembered this color and this plainness, remembered the unremarkable decoration on the ponytail, and also remembered it being the only cute part of that girl's dressing–

"Why it had to be…"

This moment he could not help but whisper those words as his actions were already

involuntary. That’s why Ikta closed his mouth and as if it wasn’t enough he held his breath too.

When he finally managed to get his self-control back, he slowly moved his sight on the two bodies again…The first to have perished should be the male soldier below her. The girl was in a supine position that covered the body of the male soldier, her body was lacerated with countless stab wounds; furthermore, her still held an air gun with the bayonet equipped–You could understand with a glance that her life ended when she wanted to protect a companion.

“I had since met you twice.”

His self-restrain begun to crack and his tightly closed lips softened. The words that shouldn’t be said poured out of Ikta’s heart.

“I always, had been looking forward to our third meeting–”

This was a meaningless confession, for him to be a follower of science those were empty words that should not have been said.

“–…. Kuh……Good bye, Kanna.”

As if he was swinging down a hatchet, with those words Ikta bid farewell and cut off his current inexcusably disgraceful appearance… As if sensing the time was ripe, a gust of wind took the ribbon in his hand away. The youth did not try to catch the object that was flying far away, he turned his back and walked past.

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Chapter 4 Leaving with a Modest Reputation Part 1

Part 1

“Platoon Yatori, begin scorch attack.”

The sound of air flowing started after the unemotional voice ended. The houses were using wood and mud-bricks as building material with plenty of dry straw used in roofing, there was also storages full of dried corns–these symbols of human settlement were one after another pierced by countless incandescent burning arrows.

“Platoon Torway, Platoon Matthew, blow wind to help with the combustion, make the fire propagate to the west.”

Air gunner troops’ wind spirit begun sending fresh air toward the burning houses. The fueled flames immediately invigorated burning in the direction led by the wind. The first building collapsed followed by a second one, soon after most of building in sight range were burned down.

A village became scorched earth. The reason being the fire arrows fired by Yatori’s incineration unit; the wind supplied by Torway and Matthew’s air gunner units; and the orders Ikta gave that made them do all this.

“Not being satisfied with looting and murdering and finally resorted to burn everything down… You truly are devils!”

The village was gradually burned down, cursing words continuously came from the mouths of women who, despite being terrified, stood out, and children hiding behind the back of the village chief…. their assessment truly is regrettable, Ikta thought. Murder, plunder, arson, these clearly are not devil’s but human specialties.

“Ah〜please just wait a little bit longer. Once we extinguish the fire we will escort everyone to the western settlement.”

Hearing the voice of Ikta who used a tone like doing some boring chores made insults come one after another from the mouths of villagers who lost their home to the flames. Ikta decided to ignore them, as long as he is not totally looked down upon, then let the villagers say whatever they want. After all, this was a good way to vent anger, furthermore, as the insults from the villagers became worse and worse, the soldiers’ guilt

also decreased.

However, the one thing he didn't know how to deal with was infant cries. This stimulus, obstinately poking at the soldiers' conscience, together with the curses was incessant from beginning till now.

"Ah〜so noisy…. there shouldn't be any ear plugs in Anarai's box that only block infants' cries right? If classified as military technology wouldn't its use, be simply 'Defense equipment for conscience'?"

Ikta half-jokingly, half in earnest, said so. Conscience– speaking of which, this is something that is most difficult to keep on the battlefield.

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"–Warrant Officer Ikta!? Also the Igsem's Jou-chan and Remeon's handsome…. wait, why are you guys here?"

After joining forces with Haro's unit, while repeating the altitude adaptation and reaching an elevation of 3800 meters, an unexpected fateful reunion was waiting for them. The Lieutenant Senpa Sazaruf who was their instructor when they just came to the northern region, apparently had first reached the frontline.

They were lead into the tent that functioned as headquarters, here everybody sat on normal chairs they haven't seen for a while. On the chin of Lieutenant Sazaruf who greeted them, was an unkempt beard that had reached a length it could no longer be distinguished from stubbles.

"There's no specific reason. Each time we finished the delivery mission we were pushed forward and forward, without noticing it, we got here."

"No no no…. what forward are ya talking, we are almost at the forefront. And your units were designated to be reserves at the beginning of the war no? I had news about you guys doing some support missions from the rear, but……"

What went wrong in the middle that got you here? The Lieutenant's eyes asked this. Of course nobody could answer that, even more, they themselves wanted to know the answer.

"It's because, huh…. at first there were also other cadets, but in the middle of it they gave up one after another…."

"No one received mountain warfare training, that result was also granted. Even we don't know what ending we would have reached if we didn't get Ikkun's instructions……"

Matthew and Torway were whispering such conversation. Lieutenant Sazaruf was at first surprised for quite a long while, then regaining his composure, faced at these unexpected reinforcements with a face showing 'how should I deal with this?' expression.

"…. How damaged are the troops? The total number of personnel and soldiers capable of fighting are?"

"We have sent to the rear twenty-four injured from the five Platoons. While it will not affect combat operations, but Warrant Officer Matthew's air gunner unit is missing nine men, it has the biggest vacancies. So if possible we would like to replenish the manpower before the next operation."

“You only received this degree of damage…Also it seems that before getting here you swapped multiple instructors? Each time you had the handover it should have been chaotic, at those time who was responsible of reorganize the group?”

“It was me, right now I am also speaking as the temporary commander of all troops.”

Ikta answered clearly. In doing so he didn’t try to muddle, nor was he humble, it was because of the necessity first identifying who would be responsible of all their actions to date.

Lieutenant Sazaruf did not just take everything as told, instead he, as if nothing happened, carefully observed the expression of everyone present. However, hearing Ikta state his status as commander did not cause disapproval or antipathy like connotations from the others. It seems it was appropriate to consider his words not lies or exaggerations.

“….Warrant Officer Yatorishino. I ask you, why did you leave the command right in the hands of Warrant Officer Ikta?”

“Yes sir. It was because at that stage, I believed it was the most efficient way of mobilizing manpower.”

“Even more effective than having you commanding?”

“My unit is the only cavalry unit. The responsibility of directing everything would limit my actions, making it impossible to fully utilize the original cavalry power. Based on that, I think the decision of handing the commanding right to Warrant Officer Ikta was correct.”

When explaining, Yatori didn’t mention the merit of them both having command right, she just pointed out the result of using the right man for the right job. Ikta’s expression also hinted that’s how things were, thus Lieutenant Sazaruf nodded his head. There, Haro tried to change the topic.

“–About that, Lieutenant.”

“Eh? I haven’t told you yet? Actually I am now a Captain, Warrant Officer Haroma. The reason being the previous commander perished for a stab wound. However, this is not an official promotion but a temporary appointment.”

“Ah, is that so. Then Captain… If it is convenient, can you tell us the current situation of the war?”

“Ohho, normally of course I wouldn’t divulge that. Well, you guys come here.”

Captain Sazaruf who was promoted from Lieutenant, straightforwardly accepted the request, got up and turned to the table situated directly behind him. The five also followed his actions.

“Although it was much more slower than expected, however the war has finally reached its final stage. The three Shinaak tribe punitive brigades, using different paths to infiltrate deep into the mountain has successfully rendezvoused at the plateau ahead of here. However, because each army had, during the long journey, many stragglers, the military strength after joining forces probably does not reach ten thousands.”

Exactly as the Captain has said, drew on the rectangular map of Grand Arfatra Mountain range, cutting in from the southern foothills, were three march routes. In order to prevent

information leakage to the enemy, this was intelligence only told to military officers of the frontlines and central headquarters at the base. This was also the first time the five saw something like this…

"…Ehm Captain Sazaruf. May I ask some questions…?"

"If your questions are criticism to the foundation of this operation, then spare me from it, Warrant Officer Torway. Because there is no point in talking about that now."

Although Captain Sazaruf tried to stop Torway's questioning before it even started, but his face clearly shows how he has given up on that matter. No matter how dissatisfied they were about the content, they who are on the frontline are not in the position to change the strategy itself. Go do this, go do that– they could only within the range of their orders do their best, thus this result was already their best efforts.

"Since you especially came here, then there will be a lot of work you guys will be responsible for. But rest assured, I won't require you to fight on the frontline with us, your work will have safety as condition."

If it truly was like that, then it deserves my thanks–Ikta frankly thought so. It was so long since he last met a instructor willing to consider the training troops commanded by a greenhorn Warrant Officer would be immature…Although right now he wasn't really sure how reliable would this instructor be.

"However, because of that condition, it will be unpleasant jobs. About this you can only think about it as gaining experience and obediently give up…Yeah, although the scale is pretty small, but it's perfect, I will combine your five Platoons and regard it as a company. If you all still do not mind Ikta being the commander then congratulations, from this moment you became a company commander."

Tl note: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Company_commander

"…Oh, I understand. Then, specifically speaking, what should we do?"

Ikta asked while stretching his body, Captain Sazaruf after very deliberately revealing a smile, answered:

"First you simply have to lit a campfire, then you'll have to lead groups of guests. Please don't lose the the guests' complaints."

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"It seems that I can't help but admit my evaluation of Captain Sazaruf was too low, especially his superb sense of humor to call burning down villages a campfire."

Ikta set up a configuration with soldiers in front and behind where the residents of the burned village is encircled and lead on the road to other villages. After reaching this elevation, the tall trees appeared less and less, the surrounding scenery, especially the mountain road can be said to look more like rugged rocky ground.

"However, this kind of order is still fairly good… if we were to compare it with one that required us to kill the villagers."

Suuya, visualizing herself executing that kind of order, shook her shoulders, the others' feeling were also the same.

To be honest, Ikta's statement that his evaluation of Captain Sazaruf had gone up was sincere. The reason was because he heard it was Captain Sazaruf who proposed the 'after burning down the Shinaak tribe's village, move the residents to other villages'–which replaced the original plan of 'kill villagers'.

"That's right, I too support this more appropriate approach compared to the original. Even if the added time and effort is inevitable, however while maintaining the purpose of cutting the enemy's supplies, I predict that in the future we might receive some complimentary gift."

Not considering the repugnance caused by the thought of 'Killing all non-combatant too' Ikta, on the strategic point of view, still had praises for the plan prosed by Captain Sazaruf. As the war has already entered its final stage, the large amount of prisoners obtained could become material to use in the final negotiation requesting for Shinaak tribe's surrender.

"However, are we choosing an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth… Lieutenant General Safida from the beginning of the rebellion till now still hasn't proposed a proactive strategy, now we are really reaching the limits of that."

What ideas the Lieutenant General had when he ordered the burning of the villages was clear as day to Ikta. He probably thought since the enemy's strategy to cut off our supply chain was so beneficial to them, then we should have done just the same to our foes. Well you can't say he was wrong, it's just not really smart.

"Since the imperial army is the one invading, the Shinaak tribe are using the main stage that is the Grand Arfatra Mountain range to play guerrilla warfare. Because they made use of the geographical familiarity and, throughout the whole mountain set up supply points with resources and personnel, something like a 'stronghold that would deal them a huge blow if taken' does not exist. The same dispersion issue the northern garrison was having a headache about, they instead used it as a weapon."

Ikta bluntly gave his positive judgement that it was a very brilliant plan… However, compared with the Shinaak tribe, Lieutenant General Safida's approach was extremely rough.

"Just as Torway wanted to point it out before, I too was dumbfounded at the sight of that map. Three brigades marched into the mountain on three routes but the distance separating each of them was more than 100Km, I heard it was because they wanted to have rendezvous at the midpoint of the mountain. In other words, before reaching the rendezvous point the three brigades totally won't be able to give mutual assistance."

In this war, the biggest reason for the imperial army's bitter struggles was this. The Shinaak tribe just had to attack on all points of the isolated marching routes, if there was any point that were to collapse, it would have meant the supply chain to the frontline would be cut. And soldiers without supplies are unable to fight off enemies.

"To avoid that situation he should have set the marching routes to be close and parallel to each other. Also the supply chain shouldn't have been a sole line, instead it should be evolved it to an interconnected pluriplanar reticular system…. This clearly was the iron rule, no matter if you were to fight on mountains or plains, Lieutenant General Safida instead didn't pay attention to it."

Tl note: the big words means a web like structure where it is also expanded longitudinally and not only vertically

If you were to look for them, one would find many more mistakes. For instance, there was another issue that after setting field bases on the marching route, they only ordered the soldiers to completely devote themselves to holding their post and never had the troops pay attention to means of retreat. Winning or losing a stronghold was commonplace in war, in disadvantageous situation you just had to temporally retreat and re-establish the ranks, then go recapture the stronghold.

“He did not have to be a famous general, however Lieutenant General Safida let many soldiers lose their lives in unnecessary deaths under the lead of normal generals. To make things worse, not only had the imperial army pay the price for those mistakes, this even spread to Shinaak tribe villagers who originally needn’t to be killed.”

Even now in some place at lower altitude than here, there should be villages burning. Ikta thought. Different from the plan proposed by Captain Sazaruf, over there it is complete massacre. Buildings, farmlands, livestock, and villagers– everything will be taken by the burning villages, how many of them will remain till the end?

“No matter from where I look at it, it’s unscientific, the costs and results are disproportional. This truly is a mess of a war.”

Ikta disdainfully concluded. That person, the more he was angry the more he loved to talk and argue〜Suuya who was listening and experiencing this herself noticed housing appearing on the track the troops were advancing.

“Company commander, we have arrived, It’s that village.”

“It seems so. Time is precious, quickly lead in our group of guest from the rear.”

After signaling to the soldiers responsible for surveillance, Ikta, with Platoon as base unit, separated the troops and had them take care of the refugees, they then led and entered the village. After that, the villagers noticing the sound, stuck their heads out from everywhere, with fear and fright in their eyes looked at the soldiers.

This village originally accommodated 200 people. After the Imperial army took control of the area, they rapidly increased the numbers of temporary buildings and tents to create a refugee camp, and decided to accept into this place the villagers who lost their homes to the burning, which outnumbered the original population over five times.

Of course a building or tent will be shoehorned with more than ten refugees. However, in order to avoid creating the flame of dispute, they arranged as much as possible to have people with close relationship live togheter.

“Good, first of all, eight people in this house. The Sotoi family of five all inside, followed by Yam couple and the little sister Kotai.”

Ikta called out names indicating refugees and cleanly assigned them to the empty premise. For this purpose, he, before departing, had already grasped the names, appearance and relationship of the people living in villages he torched.

“You all gone inside? Good. Then next is…. Ouch!”

A stone thrown by someone hit Ikta's thigh. Although it didn't possess much strength, but the alert soldiers near him immediately raised their crossbows against the refugees.

"Get lost! Empire's dogs! Hurry up and scat!"

However, the offender who cried out with a high pitched voice while picking up a second stone was a boy yet to reach 10 years old. There was no need for soldiers' action, the nearby mother already embraced the boy stopping him.

"…….Uh…. Then next, it's that house facing east…."

Ikta thought of considering as nothing happened and continued the job. But this made the boy even more furious, taking advantage of the moment his mother loosened her arms, he broke free and ran directly to the hated enemy of the village. This time the soldiers stepped forward to stop him, but he, using his petite figure, slipped through under their legs.

"Get lost! Go back to the plains! Give back! Give back our village!"

The boy with unfluent pronunciation desperately vented his anger and with his fists continuously hit Ikta's thing and waist. Although a soldier got there and grabbed him, but as he tried to pull the boy away, he firmly bit his teeth to Ikta's military pants, making the man hesitate on how he should proceed. If he forcefully pulled the boy away, he might break his frontal teeth from the root.

Tl note: the soldier is genderless

"….Ah〜Young'un, I truly understand your reasoning. After this job is done I will immediately disappear, I promise I will disappear without a single trace so for now can you let go of me?"

Even Ikta lacked resolution when facing this situation. Although he tried to solve in a peaceful manner, however the angry child could not be persuaded. Left with no other choices, Ikta could only take compromises.

"…Awu!"

The boy's nose was hit by a sharp impact which made him unintentionally loosen his bite. The soldier immediately separated the two…this was the ultimate weapon against children, the power of a finger flick attack. The trick to add in more impact was an upward flick to the opponent's nose from below.

"……..Ah……"

The soldier brought back the boy to his parents. However, he then stretched his hand to the nose as he felt something was coming out—next, a red liquid started dripping onto the boy's palm.

Screams came from the parents, Ikta too who was watching from the sidelines was stunned.

"Wu…..WuaAaAaaaAaaAah!"

Seeing himself bleeding acted as breaking point making the boy start crying loudly. The refugees who did not know what was happening just had to turn this way, to see the figure

of the loudly weeping boy with blood on his face. Between them, the worst scenario immediately ran amok–they though that young soldier would go as far brutally beat to bleeding such a small child.

Feeling he did something troublesome, the whole face of Ikta stiffened, to him, crying children are the most difficult thing to handle.

“Whaaaaaaat are you doooooing you dishonorable chap!!!!”

However, the voices blaming him did not come from the refugees with eyes full of hatred, instead they came from a completely unexpected direction. The site resounded with footsteps running at full speed. Just as Ikta was turning toward the direction the sound was coming from, the next second his cheek was hit by a gigantic fist.

Before he even had time to scream, his body violently flew away and hit the ground, he then no longer moved. Completely ignoring Ikta, the man who rushed to the source of crying sound– Warrant Officer Deinkun Hargunska walked toward the boy who’s having a nosebleed.

“Brave youth, are you alright! My companion truly acted excessively!”

In front of the refugees who were stunned because of what had happened, Warrant Officer Deinkun took out a handkerchief from the pocket of his military uniform, after wetting it with clean water created by the water spirit, rubbed the boy’s face.

“Hm, it’s a nosebleed huh! It is evidence of resisting violence, in other words it’s an honorable wound! You deserve praises!”

“…Eh…..Ah….”

“No, no, even if you don’t say anything I understand! Although I have already sanctioned the guy who acted roughly toward the courageous you, but with only that it is unreasonable to ask you to calm down…Ugh!”

Bang! The sound of beating rang. Turns out Warrant Officer Deinkun threw a directly frontal blow to his nose. After a moment of silence, an unknown amount of blood many times over that of the boy’s flooded out.

“Huahahaha, now it’s fair! Please take this as apology and forgive that guy’s roughness, oh little brave!”

Warrant Officer Deinkun whose blood was coming out of his nose like a waterfall, hearty laughed and patted the boy on the shoulder. The refugees on the sideline looking at this series of events were completely overwhelmed by his momentum and has temporally forgotten their hatred.

“Are…Are you alright Company commander…..!”

On the other hand, Suuya frantically rushed to the side of the commander who has flown for almost three meters. Perhaps from the beginning he didn’t faint? Ikta gently pushed up his body. The left cheek that received Warrant Officer Deinkun’s fist has swollen twice the size of the other side.

“…I apologize, Suuya. Can I bother you to call over Warrant Officer Deinkun?”

Suuya nodded and immediately begun to move. She went around to the back of the big military officer who was still talking with the boy and whispered in his ear with stinging voice the report. The resentment of having the superior beaten was fully displayed on her face.

Shortly after Warrant Officer Deinkun turned and strode toward the subject he had just hit. He then with a tone like challenging an opponent spoke to Ikta who already got up and was dusting the dirt off his pants.

“To think you would raise your hand against a child, I’m really looking down upon you, Ikta Sorlok! Your identity is still tentatively an imperial Knight nominated by His Majesty, however in such situation you got wrong the great ambition of the soldier, what are you planning to do about it!

Seeing Warrant Officer Deinkun not only hit the other but also started giving a lesson made Suuya reach the limit of her tolerance.

“We just decided to calmly listen but from the start you were blabbing out self-centered statements…! Before using force why didn’t you ask what was the situation! Warrant Officer Ikta did not make the child cry on purpose–”

“You shut up! When knights are having a conversation, those not involved shall not interrupt!”

“Ugh! You clearly are just a ‘self-named’ Knight….! This really ires me, please immediately apologize to Warrant Officer Ikta about all your disrespectful action to date! Our side was even injured! If we go on like this there’s no way to settle–”

Ikta gently raised his hand to stop Suuya who wanted to push harder. Warrant Officer Deinkun ignored her who was feeling confused, and with an unhappy face looked at Ikta.

“You seems to be a hopeless person, since the beginning I wanted to preach this to you. However, because of the presence of the princess, I could only endure it till now. Meeting with me today is your doom, if there’s something you want to complain about the straightforwardly–”

“No, there aren’t. Thank you, Warrant Officer Deinkun. You truly saved me there.”

Since Warrant Officer Deinkun has completely entered in his battle stance, this reply was far beyond his expectations. There would be no one who would think someone you hit and insulted would give his thanks. While he was stunned because of the shock, Ikta continued to calmly speak.

“Saying since we are at it might sound rude, but I bother you with continuing the job of assigning residences to them? You shouldn’t be hated by the refugees, and since the situation has developed to this point, it may be best for me to leave as soon as possible.”

“…….Of course there are no problems……”

“Thank you, I’m truly sorry that I have to push the responsibilities of this job onto you, in the future I definitely find opportunities to pay you back.”

After Ikta lowered his head and finished talking, he called over his troops and moved toward the village’s exit. Suuya who has yet to calm down followed beside him and

continued to ask the superior:

“Why….Why are we stepping back? We should have explained the actual facts and refuted him!”

“Why should we? I clearly have reasons to thank Warrant Officer Deinkun and miss any for resenting him– look behind you.”

Following Ikta, Suuya too turned her head and looked in the same direction, what entered her vision was the sight of Warrant Officer Deinkun busy directing the refugees after having taken over Ikta. The Shinaak villagers all obediently listened to his instructions, after the earlier event, no one harbored hatred in their eyes toward the soldiers anymore.

“Making the kid bleed was my mistake. To settle up that situation would require tremendous efforts, and even after that I believe it would leave grudges. Deinkun helped us arbitrate that matter, so we have to give our thanks to him.”

“Why like this….! I don’t think he had thought of that. I believe that person just wanted to show Knight like behavior in front of a bunch of people!”

“It doesn’t matter. He actions were based on his personal chivalry code, the situation got fully resolved too, because his behavior was effective in these circumstances it certainly deserves direct praises.”

“I cannot accept it! Because when we are battling with the Shinaak tribe, our job is… it’s to kill all of them…! Then in that case isn’t Warrant Officer Deinkun the same as us? Instead just him was commended because he treated well an enemy kid… this is too weird, it’s just hypocritical!”

Suuya as if she could no longer keep her feelings in check, yelled. Ikta gently raised his hand and pat her head.

“….I say Suuya. If you believe that no matter what kind situation kindness is done in good faith, and whatever kindness that doesn’t fit that condition is hypocrisy, then it would be best to change your way of thinking. The reason is, humans are only able to archive something that is within the extent permitted by the circumstances.”

“Warrant Officer Deinkun is the same. From his personality’s standpoint, the current fratricidal war making fellow citizen kill each other should be cause of deep pain, right? Facing someone taking the initiative to attack you leaves no choices but to fight back, however when the other side is not doing that, you’d want to treat them as kindly as possible. The causes of these thoughts are very natural and there’s no need to be ashamed of them. When you knew that after torching the village you didn’t have to kill the inhabitants, didn’t you also sigh in relief? These two things work on the same principle.”

For Suuya, this was the first time she was gently admonished by the superior. Perhaps it was because of that? Tears poured out for no reason at all, she could only raise her head and desperately try to hold them back.

“….Wuu… If that guy’s feelings is the same as ours, then why is our position so different? Warrant Officer Ikta was hit by the stone thrown by the child, the face too beaten to be so swollen. Only that Deinkun was able to show his righteous actions, what is the cause of all these differences…!”

Irrepressible tears fell along Suuya's cheek leaving a watery trace, her superior, using his finger, rubbed it away.

"I apologize, Suuya. It's just this matter puts emphasis on the aptness…. you too understand, unlike me who just holds to an empty title, Warrant Officer Deinkun is a downright Knight. The role of a hated character does not suit that kind of person right?"

After saying so, Ikta scantly tried to make a smile with his swollen face. That expression, from another point of view, appeared as if he was crying, making Suuya uncomfortable in looing back directly.

***

After successfully joining forces at the 4200 meters high plateau, the soldiers were embracing each other, rejoicing for meeting again and among them some were even crying. Because whatever your unit's affiliation was with any of the three brigades, for this journey, there wasn't one soldier who didn't psychologically prepare for the 'possibility oneself wouldn't be able to reach the rendezvous point alive'.

"You gentlemen did really well to overcome the agonious journey and gather here, I feel proud of you."

Since the situation had developed this far, the supreme commander of the northern region also came to the frontline. Facing the 8900 soldiers who were exhausted from the long march and continuous battles, Lieutenant General Safida rewarded their hard work with his extremely touched manners.

However, seeing those bloodshot eyes and the messy beard, one at this point would doubt if he had enough margin to feel honored. Even if one were to put all the lives lost in this war under the category of 'Unavoidable sacrifices for the completion of the missions', the numbers were a bit too high, and after this is over it will all fall under the responsibility of Lieutenant General Safida and be investigated right? Because he was in such a situation, he now must be busy thinking what excuse he could use to deal with Central.

"Although we were ridiculed by the despicable tactics of those barbarians and costed us more effort than what we had estimated, but this war is coming close to an end. The residual Shinaak rebels' groups defeated by all of you present has gradually gathered at a large-scale settlement two days by foot down from this plateau, the presence of the matriarch Nanak Dar was also confirmed, I'm afraid that will be the last battle closing the curtains to this punitive operation. I hope you gentlemen will display your true battle prowess and make the fresh blood of the Shinaak tribe as offering, dedicated to all our comrades fallen on the Grand Arfatra Mountain!"

He really dared to say… Ikta pulled a long face. If you make use of the enemy's blood to comfort the dead, the first blood that should be offered wouldn't have to be from the one who was just now advocating with a loud voice a revenge to relieve the spirits? He was the one who decided to go to war, it was also him who drew the flawed invasion plans. Most of the fallen officers were also victims of his inability– this point of view was also the reality.

"Currently the three brigades grouped here have been completely rearranged, however the departure time is set to tomorrow morning, today will be used for preparations. Everyone

should eat well and sleep well, making use of today to recharge your energies in order to face the final battle… this is what I wanted to pass to you!”

Maybe he was taking into account the soldiers’ exhaustion, or perhaps he didn’t have the strength speak a wordy statement, the Lieutenant General’s speech was unexpectedly brief. The soldiers who got a day off under the commands of their superiors, returned to the campground.

The vast plateau was packed full with the 9000 soldiers, of course the headquarters tent set up at the center also gathered many officers. However, compared to the early stage of the war, the average age of the group went down more than ten years. The reason for this was because many high-ranking military officers have withdrawn either because of wounds or death, and their vacant positions filled with urgently appointed lower ranked officers.

Of course Ikta and others were also included and belonged to youngest group. In the big warm tent, the order of knights that still remained even after experiencing the brutal battlefield stayed at the table and had a normal meal they didn’t get since long ago.

“Oh〜we really updated the generation to a considerable extent. Looking at this situation, the northern garrison will more or less run into problems when resuming normal activity after the war.”

Ikta said so while sipping the smoking hot tea. He who was a Warrant Officer of a reserve force in the rear is now a Company commanded tasked with a job that is in reality that of a Lieutenant’s. If one were interested in succeeding, this couldn’t but be considered a golden opportunity, however, for the one person we are talking about, compared to this he desired more returning to a normal life and drink alcohol.

“It has long been the case hasn’t it? After all the pillars came down with Major Taekk’s death.”

“Too many officers have fallen…. The original 18000 forming the three brigades, after joining on this side has become 8900 strong. Who would have thought only half would be left. Wouldn’t this kind of situation be normally considered complete annihilation?”

“It’s because the numbers of soldiers withdrawing because there were no definite countermeasures for altitude sickness have long exceeded the deaths and wounded….and this also doesn’t include those who fell in battle because of the altitude sickness.”

“This truly is a tragic war, no matter from what point of view you are looking at it from…. I think this will be passed down as such even after this is over.”

Silence fell. Because of the impact of fatigue accumulated until now, it no matter what made people unable to say their usual spiel. Yatori felt spending the vacation they have finally gotten in there was not good and after finishing the meal she got up.

“Haro, do you want to come rub our sweat off? I overheard it earlier, it seems today we might use a bit of warm water. Maybe it’s just to a comfortable level, but at least we can change clothes.”

“Ah… great idea… I really wanted to freshen up, I will come with you〜”

Haro very straightforwardly agreed and together with Yatori left the tent. As result an

indescribable atmosphere was created between the boys left behind.

“…. Women, no matter what kind of situation they are in, they are still women.”

“Hahahaha….wanting to keep a neat outward appearance at all times has already become their natural instinct.”

“What does it matter, it’s thanks to that our troops can remain a gorgeous atmosphere. Speaking of the only unconditioned merit the imperial army has, it’s the equal male female ratio. I don’t aknowledge any objection.”

Ikta unhesitatingly asserted. As if hearing this ticked something amazing in Matthew’s head, he with a serious expression leaned forward on the table followed by a whisper:

“…….Uhm, I always wanted to ask you guys this question….”

“Wha-what’s the matter, Makkun? You’re suddenly being so serious…”

Matthew looked up closely at Ikta and Torway’s faces, and after hesitating five seconds he blurted it out.

“…How do you cope with that in time of war? That…ugh… I mean, you know, how to handle those kind of desires…”

Silence followed. After some time has elapsed, Torway who was slow in understand the meanings, was totally flushed with a red face, Ikta near them instead crossed his arms as if deep in thought. Since no response came even after he had waited for a while, Matthew asked the same question again.

“…. Matthew, my friend. To simply answer that kind of question, we need to separate us into two kind of people. The hero in pursuit of close friendship and the aloof warrior.”

“What hero in pursuit of friendship…. you are talking in exaggerated analogy again. Whatever, you are correct that the end result would be something like that.”

“Thus the hero and the warrior are incompatible with each other. Based on your expectations for mine and Torway’s answer this might end up very well with a war. Are you mentally prepared?”

Ikta seriously made such assessment. In front of Matthew who was being overwhelmed by his spirit, Torway hesitatingly murmured:

“I….I normally don’t go thinking about that kind of stuff….”

“You can’t possibly never have those thoughts, you are a man after all, what do you deal with it when you can’t control it anymore?”

“Matthew, let him off. That Ikemen is not the ‘hero trying to mimic the warrior, but in reality still remains a hero’ type and have complex feelings inside kind of person, but instead a warrior that does not understand how to be flexible. Even if it is now just an unrequited love, he is still very single minded toward his love interest.”

Hearing Ikta’s conjecture made Torway’s blush propagate to his ears and him lowering his head. Seeing this spectacle made Matthew accept Ikta’s theory and made his target move onto the next prey.

“Well, honestly speaking I also thought Torway to be like that… however the issue is you, Ikta.”

“In war times, both homosexual and heterosexual activities are strictly forbidden by the imperial military regulations.”

“What’s your point in bringing up the military regulations… basically, even those who actually do the deed are aware of these rules. Isn’t it because of this that since the past up to right now there are only increasingly more soldiers withdrawing because of pregnancy?”

“Yeah, you’re right. Even if we were to limit it with regulations, there is no way to stop people in love. About this I am also saying now that I completely share’s your thoughts.”

“Since you put it that way, you truly have done it? …If it were so then where did you find the so important partner? Talking about places closest to you… is she from your own Platoon?”

“OiOi Matthew, doing that kind of thing if caught would affect your subordinates’ trust, even I am not an exception.”

“How would that be. Even that Sergeant Mittokalif was the same, she clearly harbored such deep hatred toward you at the beginning, but aren’t you completely close to each other right now?”

“About Suuya, our relationship just zeroed from being in the negative…. furthermore, losing your subordinates’ trust will drop the troops’ total strengths, in other word it would result in an increase of risks in battle operations. In war times when me and my friends’ lives are on the line, do you think I would do such unscientific practices?”

Since he himself was able to survive so far only thanks to listening Ikta’s instructions, Matthew could not help but accept this basis. However, there were many more points he could pressure and Matthew came with another question:

“Then, have you put your hands on female from other units? …No, it’s more realistic for you to look for partners who are also officers. After all, in that case even if your relationship cover was to be blown, it wouldn’t affect your subordinates’ trust.”

“That was a spectacular inference, Matthew. But did you think this out thoroughly– according to your theory, if we are talking about the potential partner I would most likely choose, wouldn’t some familiar names stand out?”

As Ikta had just finished saying this, Torway who originally still kept his head low, very quickly raised his face, Matthew too with enough strength to move the table, pushed forward his body.

“Don’t tell me you made your move on either Yatori or Haro! Where! …No, wait a second, I don’t want to hear it, I would like to know it but at the same time don’t want to know it! If I were to know, I wouldn’t know how to face that person from tomorrow onward…!”

Matthew agonized over it while holding his head. On the other side, Torway with a focused stare that would pierce a hole into a person looked at Ikta.

What's wrong Ikemen, you are staring at me. Oh, were you interested? Interested in whether I am your love rival.

"N-No… it's not like that…"

Hearing Ikta maliciously leading the topic, Torway was momentarily left with a loss of words….however, in his position, deep inside he thought to make use of this opportunity to clear things out.

"….But to be honest, since the moment I met you I had this feeling. I felt that between Ikkun and Yatori-san there's something that doesn't allows meddling from others. If my intuition was not wrong…"

I hope you can clearly say it here and now–Torway bearing this in mind stared at Ikta, Matthew too was holding his breath while looking from the side.

A dozens of seconds then passed. After letting a set of completely grueling moments to pass, Ikta finally with exaggerating actions, shrugged his shoulders.

"….Sorry, sorry. I apologize for pouring cold water on this heated discussion, but think about it for a second, can you guys imagine the scenario where that Yatori, the Igsem successor known by everyone would violate military regulations for this reason?"

"Ah…"

"Now that you mention it…"

"See? As result of eliminating her, only Haro remains. No matter how weak that girl looks like, her defense in critical areas are really solid. In conclusion, to leave some hopes, let's say I'm trying to break through. If there is some progress, I will immediately inform you."

As Ikta was peacefully bringing the discussion to the conclusion, Captain Sazaruf who had dinner a little distance away walked toward them. He stopped in front of the three who timely did the salute and revealed a wry smile on his face.

"You people, it's great to be in good spirit but when discussing about a vulgar topic, you should use a lower volume. I am letting you go free because of the current situation we are in, normally I would have you run in circle around the fort as punishment for breaking discipline."

"W-We're awfully sorry…."

"It was so shameful, Makkun…."

"Oh I'm sorry. Speaking of which, Captain Sazaruf what type are you?"

Ikta dropped the two who were reflecting with a blush on their face, with a full face smile expanded the discussion to include the new member. Seeing this bold act, Captain Sazaruf did not get angry, instead decided to play along and answer his question.

"Although I can't say this publicly, but in the past I could be considered a hero… well, even in this war I did not have any margin to play around with nearby women."

"As expected of our senior, the number of battles he has experienced matches his age. When we return to the base please allow me to hear of those heroic tales."

“Ha, I don’t know if the contents will fill your expectations but it’s for another time– then I need to go now, you guys go to sleep early today.”

After casually raising his hand to send his regards, Captain Sazaruf left the place. After watching his back leave, this time it was Matthew’s turn to get up. Since the meal and discussion had long come to an end, this was the natural thing to do.

However, as Matthew was about to nonchalantly leave his seat, he was stopped by Ikta.

“Wait a moment Matthew, my friend. You pressed your question onto us and now you are trying to escape before answering anything, isn’t this a tad bit too unfair?”

“Guh…”

“Well you too tell us. It’s nothing difficult, you just have to choose from the two answers– are you a hero? Or a warrior? Do you want to rely on friendship? Or prefer a solitary life?”

Ikta with a very entangling voiced tried to force an answer out of Matthew, a very, very heavy silence was maintained between them for more than twenty seconds. However, after that– Matthew with a resolute face turned around and started shouting. With an upright position as if he didn’t have anything to be hidden from the world, as if he wanted to reveal the soul itself.

“…Pay tribute to the Warrior!”

Facing this amazing charisma, Ikta and Torway stood up at the same moment and responded with a salute pose.

“”Sir,yes,sir!””

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The following morning came, under the orders of Lieutenant General Safida, the three brigades with already depleted personnel departed after full preparation. Having rested for a whole day and maybe perhaps the understanding that the next battle may be last, permitted the soldiers to maintain the morale.

“Oh… my apologies…”

“Be more careful you retard! You have a death wish?!”

It’s only, even at this very moment, it can’t be said there’s no uneasiness in Ikta’s eyes. The first point was the murderous intent some soldiers from the other brigades were emitting. They would start cursing and threatening others just because they bumped into their shoulder, in worse cases they would make the first move and start fights.

“I can’t help but think that the brutish members have increased. It’s not like we are mercenaries led by warlords, even if the imperial army had made mistakes, it’s not like we are some unorganized brutish group.”

“It’s in helpless situation that they become like that. After seeing so many deaths from both sides, compared to maintaining control, letting it all go is way easier… it’s only I really hope my subordinates becomes like that.”

After he finished speaking, Ikta peeked toward the back. A company formed by knight’s

training corps and tasked to protect the headquarters followed behind him. Ikta and other officers were now in the same area as Lieutenant General Safida which is why the control of the Platoon was now left in the hands of the standing noncommissioned officers. In addition, in order to facilitate the officers' ability to survey the surrounding, they were now all mounted on horse.

Tl note: i.e. Suuya, Sargent is a NCO

"Even for me, I had them kill so many people. If we can use pumpkin cutting kitchen knife techniques to kill people, we can only say it's the result of proper training… however, are there no issues? Can those soldiers still distinguish the differences between humans and pumpkins?"

To this contradictory problem, no one could propose a satisfactory answer. However, the war will not wait and the ranks continued forward carrying with it the youths with complex feelings.

"…This terrain formation does not look good"

Captain Sazaruf whispered after seeing the landscape emerging in the frontal direction. It was a massive gorge, the two walls on face each other from a distance of 200 meters, their troops have to continue marching following one side of the valley.

Just a single misstep would cause people to fall hundreds on meters into the abyss was also a matter of course, however in this case, what worried more was the cliff on the other side. There not only were several irregular formations that could become foothold, the distance of 200 meters is also at a distance that could not be taken lightly. Perceiving the Captain's thoughts, Torway in a reserved manner said:

"About that, Captain Sazaruf…. if I am wrong please do forgive me, but are you perhaps worried of the wind mortal shelling that could come from the opposite cliff?"

"…. To think you would have guessed that. That's right, it's exactly so. If we were to be subject to a unilateral attack, we would have no means to fend for ourselves. Even if we were to consider firing back with the wind mortals, but compared to us who are marching and thus scattered, the enemy would also have their cannons distributed throughout the cliff."

In this very rare occasion Torway, after hearing the Captain's words, clearly stated his own opinion.

"While those were very legitimate concerns, but I think the possibility for that are not high."

"Ou? Why would that be, Warrant Officer Torway?"

"First, as I am an air gunner, I have certain degree of experience with the usage of wind mortals. If I were to give my opinion on the current situation, no matter where you would deploy artillery on that cliff it would be am extremely difficult feat. Since the footholds over there are all isolated, in order to transport the cannons, it would require extraordinary efforts. Even if they were to overcome that issue, the next thing that come is the foothold being too small, just the body of the wind mortal alone is enough to fill all the space, there's no place left to store the shells that would demand almost the same amount of

space.”

“Uh…”

“Even supposing the enemy was able to find solution to these two difficulties, I think we would be able to notice the enemy’s presence from this side, and even after scanning with binoculars we didn’t find any movements. Based on the above reasons, I determined that the possibility of an enemy surprise attack is not high.”

Hearing this introverted youth who opposite to his usual clearly explained his thoughts not only Captain Sazaruf but every army companion listening around felt surprised. Furthermore, his opinion was logical and relevant, Captain Sazaruf whose uneasiness was dissipated nodded with satisfaction, as he was planning to face the front once again, at that moment….

“No, it’s better if we make preparations. Captain Sazaruf, can we have shields on the side of this officers’ area?”

Ikta categorically spoke words that the overthrown the previous consensus, both Torway and Captain Sazaruf stared at him in surprise.

“…I agree with what Warrant Officer Torway had just explained, based on what are you trying to overthrow that? Warrant Officer Ikta.”

“I too agree with what he has said. Furthermore, I’m not trying to overturn his ideas, it’s just I think it’s better if we take preventive measures.”

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to be extra careful… But against the shelling we predicted, a defense of shield bearing soldiers cannot be called a good countermeasure you know? ”

“Even that would be better than nothing… and you also have to consider the object flying over might not only be mortal shells.”

As he mentioned this, Ikta looked at the other side with a stiff expression. Seeing the seriousness in his eyes, Torway too abandoned his theory of ‘there will be no surprise attack from the other side of the cliff’– since Ikta was in alert, then of course there was that possibility.

“…. Captain Sazaruf, I apologize, I would like to retract what I had said. As Warrant Officer has proposed, can you order the shield bearers to protect the officers group?”

“Hey hey, are you serious? If we make a shield wall on the side facing the cliff that would mean we too, in order to be protected by the shields, get off the horses. This would also include Lieutenant General Safida over th…”

“There would be no point in doing so otherwise! Field-grade officers have all gone to command the front ranks, not including Lieutenant General himself, the highest ranked officer among us is you Captain. Please go try propose this, show your courage!”

Captain Sazaruf, who was completely being pushed around, said ‘whoa’ and corrected facial expression at the same time pulled on the reins and got closer to the Lieutenant General Safida advancing on horse and who had the same red eyes he had yesterday.

Tl note: whoa is a vocal command telling the horse to slow down
https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/whoa

“…Hm? What?”

Facing his regional supreme commander stare at him with suspecting eyes, having a cold sweat Captain Sazaruf made the proposal.

“Err… That… I mean… after surveying the surrounding terrain, my subordinates have suggested the need to be on guard for nearby enemies, I too agreed so there was a proposal for having the shield bearers to protect all officers present…”

“If you have judged that then just take the initiative.”

“Yes, I’m very sorry. However, because of that, there is another request…. considering the height of the shields the infantry carry, there is no way they would completely protect people on horse from shells…. so I truly apologize for this but…”

Even before the fiercely cold sweating Captain who was dragging out the conversation finished, the Lieutenant General already understood.

“–You mean I need to get off the horse?”

“Ah… ehm… that’s the end result… yes… to think we would trouble you Lieutenant General with that, I’m deeply terrified…”

Captain Sazaruf threw away his reputation and self-esteem and is now just pleading with a lowered head. Even with that the Lieutenant General still felt reluctant, but facing the persistence of the humble Captain, he could not bear with it much longer.

“…I just need to come down right? Then I will get off the horse.”

Lieutenant General Safida as if he was left with no other choices came down the horse and started walking while pulling the reins. Captain Sazaruf following the superior’s lead also got off the horse and looking like he had exhausted all his stamina, he walked back toward Ikta.

“….I got the permission, with this it’s all good right? Good, then you all come down quickly too…”

Captain Sazaruf thought of his earlier appearance and ordered languidly. He then cursed:”Ahh goddamit! That was an earful!” and forcefully scratched his head. At this moment Ikta opened his mouth and said:

“…Captain Senpa Sazaruf, may I express my thoughts?”

“OiOi, do you plan to keep abusing this uncle… yes yes yes, I know what you want to say, I know earlier I was good for nothing–”

“You are the best superior, I want say this coming deep from my heart.”

First were Ikta and Torway, then following their action everyone from the order of knights with the same movement raised their hands in salute. Facing them who were truly emitting an aura of respect and gratefulness, Captain Sazaruf, unaccustomed to this kind of treatment, was left unknowing of how to respond to that, for now he could only stand there in place for many seconds.

“…Haha why are you suddenly doing this, you shouldn’t tease adults.”

Then Captain Sazaruf as if escaping the subordinates' gaze turned away toward the front and scratched his cheek seemingly very embarrassed. The same thoughts occurred to the five members of the order of knights looking at this scene– after getting involved with this war, it's the first time they met a superior worthy of their respect.

****

Tens of meters below the cliff along which the imperial soldiers were walking there was a ditch. In this naturally formed cave by the long erosion carried out by the wind and rain were gathered more than forty silhouettes.

"…According to the light signals sent by the unit we stationed on the other side of the cliff, the attack is about to begin, captain"

Tl note: Captain here is not the rank (thus not with uppercase C), but the general notion of a leader.

The shadow closest to the exist after observing the other side of the cliff reported toward the depth, to the silhouette whose eyes were exuding a particularly dangerous luster. Then, even if no sound was heard, somebody stood up.

"We will wait for a bit and then participate. Everyone prepare to climb; air shooters equip the short gun."

Hearing the orders, the shadows started to mount the partners on the air gun which had it barrel shortened to the minimum lenght possible and fed into their mouth the loaded magazines held in the leather bag. This way they could skip the step of loading the bullets and the air gun could also be used with only one hand. This was a weapon used if it was predicted to enter a close quarters combat.

"We must finish this mission taking advantage of the Shinaak tribe's attack. Our target is the supreme commander of the northern region, Tamshiikushik Safida alone, don't bother with the others. Only if there are obstacles coming in between, we will quickly dispose them."

"""""Yes, Sir!"""""

"At mission accomplished, or retreat if it were to end a failure, you have to use the seventeen ropes set beforehand to reach the bottom of the cliff. Moreover, death is not allowed this time. If you find yourselves cornered, you must jump down the cliff. This way there is the possibility of retrieval, your death is absolutely not permitted under their eyes."

The uniform replies continued. There are no more deficiencies– the leader of the shadows determined so and declared:

"Begin operation– <Phantom corps>, move out to battle."

In one breath they emerged from the darkness, just like an ants' army crawling out of the nest.

The signal for the start of the battle did not come from the cliff on the other side, where

Ikuta was focusing his attention, nor from below the cliff where the Phantom group had been working secretly, but on top of the Imperial Army that was stretched out along the path.

“The mountains are our world! Prepare to open your eyes wide and be surprised, you devils from the plains!”

A barrage of fire arrows rained on the soldiers’ heads with a girl’s announcement. Everyone was bewildered by an attack from an unexpected angle, and the wagons and clothings hit by the arrows started to burn.

U-Up above?! What’s this! There shouldn’t be a place big enough for an army up there.

Matthew, who had taken after Ikuta to prepare for the worst and memorized the marching path along with the surrounding terrains, could not hide his surprise. Just as his assumptions were flipped upside down and his head turned into a cacophony, Ikuta spoke stoically.

“Calm down Matthew. There’s no place to put soldiers above the cliff. Speaking normally, anyways. This is simply a desperate push by a trapped enemy.”

“Yeah, I think so too. It would be an impossible ambush except for the nimble Shinaak tribesmen, but considering the damage from the fire arrows, there are not that many of them. The shock will only last for a moment. If we can take care of the confusion now—”

While Torway was speaking, a scream erupted out as to mock his assumption. Captain Sazaruf’s troops, who had been walking in front of Ikuta’s group, were groaning while bleeding from the shoulders or their sides.

“What, gunfire…?! Is this from the above as well?!”

Captain Sazaruf shouted while taking cover, but the reality was different. Confirming that the damage from gunfire were concentrated to soldiers who were walking at the edge of the cliff, Ikuta bit his tongue after fully understanding the situation.

“No, they’re shooting from the cliff from the other side… Damn it, they were there as I thought.”

“What? From the cliff on the other side..?! Don’t be foolish. It’s at least 200m away to the other side! Even if they shoot from there, there’s no way it could reach all the way here—”

Torway, who had the related knowledge grasped the situation immediately without waiting for Captain Sazaruf to come to his own understanding. His expression soon froze into a tremble.

“Ik-kun, this means… they have the same as us…!”

“Yeah, you’re right… They’re snipers armed with air rifles!”

Just as Ikuta came to the conclusion, several allied soldiers at the edge of his vision fell. If they did not know where the shots were coming from, they could not do anything—. The moment he realized that, the boy stopped watching from the side idly.

“Torway, how long as you going to just sit there? Run over to your squad and return fire! The only squad that can do anything about this is your squad that is armed with air rifles!”

“Ug, got it…! We’ll suppress them soon enough.”

Torway quickly sprinted away after having realized his role. Even Ikuta could not formulate a response for the current situation. It was a wise precaution to have officers protected with shields, but…

“… Since we can’t avoid casualties from the snipers, only way is to speed up the march and get out of this valley as soon as possible. We just need to get out of the range of the air rifles.”

However, a messenger who waded in through the crowd of people shattered Ikuta’s optimistic outlook.

“Lieutenant General Safida! The entire front column is being attacked and further advance is not possible! I request that the rear column to wait—”

“Impossible! Do you not see this situation? This place is under attack as well, and you still ask to slow down the advance….!”

Lieutenant General Safida's face grew bluer by the moment. But Ikuta felt the same way inside. They could not fight the enemy, and escaping via advancing was also not an option. The only way left was—.

"…Captain Sazaruf! What do you think about ordering retreat for all the squad to the rear of here?"

"I agree— but at this point, a retreat is beyond my authority!"

Then you need to convince the Lieutenant General— As Ikuta was about to say that, a warning from Yatori came from behind.

"Everyone, above you! They're coming!"

Everyone snapped to look to the sky in surprise and several shadows jumped on in succession. The Shinaak tribesmen who had set up camp above cliff had slid down holding rope in one hand. The soldiers' thinking process stopped at the inconceivable ways the enemy suicide squads were appearing.

"Matthew, Haro, fix bayonet! They're coming from this side, too!"

Ikuta shouted as he fixed his bayonet to his bowgun. It was a laughable situation. The group of officers being protected front and rear by hundreds of men and surrounded with shields were being targeted by the enemy.

"Agh, arrgh… What is this. It's not going in…!"

Haro, who was some distance away from the other knights, was struggling to insert the bayonet onto her bowgun. She could just use it without fixing it on there, but she could not think that fast amidst the chaos. She was not used to battles as there was a lot of work that needed to be done in the field hospital at the rear.

"Haro, calm down! I'm going over right now!"

Ikuta ran. Yatori was guarding Lieutenant General Safida, Torway had gone off to return fire, and Matthew was barely managing to defend himself. By the process of elimination, the only thing to do was to go save Haro.

The soldiers' confusion piled on. The fearless Shinaak warriors had landed amidst them and started to attack. The majority of the soldiers had not fixed bayonet and could not adequately respond to sudden close-quarter combat that landed amidst them from the sky.

"Haro, watch out! Above!"

"Ah—"

They probably thought that a girl who was struggling to fix bayonet was a ripe target. An enemy who had slid down half way from the cliff kicked against the stone wall and jumped. And landed— right beside Haro.

He'll get there a step too late at this rate. Ikuta decided that in a flash, abandoned his bowgun and flung himself at Haro, who was standing upright. He fell while grabbing just below her waist. At that moment, the enemy's kukri just grazed the back of his head.

"Ha…. you bastard…!"

There was no time to relax even though he had dodged the attack. Instead of his abandoned weapon, he borrowed the bowgun from Haro's hand and stood up. The enemy who couldn't finish off his prey was coming for them again.

He barely received the kukri's heavy blow with the shaft of the bowgun. It became a battle of strength with a blade against a shaft, but Ikuta's chance of victory at this point had disappeared. He fell on the ground from the force pushing in from the blade and became defenseless as if asking to be finished.

"I'll join innnnnnnnn!"

Then with a voice loud enough to tear his eardrum, someone unexpected came to the rescue. Warrant Officer Deinkun's gigantic sword slashed and blew away the enemy who had rushed in to finish Ikuta.

The kukri fell on the ground split in two, and the enemy's body, which even had its spine smashed, rolled down the cliff. Even Ikuta could not keep his mouth closed at this turn of events.

"Stand up quickly, Ikuta Solork! Even this one will not be able to save you twice!"

As Ikuta tried to get up, he finally saw Warrant Officer Deinkun's gear. The armour was centered around the chest, thick plates covered various parts of the body and he wielded a claymore for mounted combat. That unfaltering medieval appearance was that of the Northern Defense Command's final defense troop, a Cuirassier platoon leader's formal wear.

"Thank you, Warrant Officer Deinkun. You said you can't save me twice, but considering the last time, it has already been twice."

"You do not need to count the last time. This one was in a hurry back then as well."

Warrant Officer Deinkun picked up the bowgun dropped a bit away and responded cooly while giving it back. The boy extended a hand to Haro to help her up in one while glancing at the face of the giant who was a full head and a half taller than him.

"There is one question. When this one had hit you and you collapsed… you did not become angry, but thanked me instead."

"Mmm, ah… Thanks to that, we could avoid the villagers' resentment."

"But you would have lost face. Were you not apprehensive about something like that would shame you?"

It was a direct and in your face kind of a question. So Ikuta replied back without hesitation.

"— No. It was a bit embarrassing, but didn't change the fact your powerful strike fixed the situation. Well, just for reference… I never had a face that would be slighted after getting beat up in the first place."

"… Is that so. Then, conversely, what kind of situation would you lose face in?"

"Ah. Hmm, that would be—"

While talking to Warrant Officer Deinkun, Ikuta handed over a bowgun with a bayonet

strapped tightly on it over to Haro. The boy spoke with a serious expression on his face while brushing off the dirt on her face with his fingers.

"— Not being able to say everything when I have wanted to, not being able to protect things when I have wanted to, those kind of situations."

On his words, Ikuta remember the face of a woman he met twice, but could not meet for the third time. But he sealed it up immediately. He closed the lid on his memories and chased away the reminiscence of the past.

That was a face he had already lost. What he needed to focus on now was the ones who were not dead.

"… I don't understand, but I do know one thing. We do not go well together."

Warrant Officer Deinkun spoke very clear-cut while holding on to the claymore on top of a horse. Ikuta understand immediately. There was no room for misunderstanding. He even thought that it would be hard to find two people who were so different from another. Even still.

"But… that's the kind of a knight you are."

The moment he heard those words, there was a self-mocking smile on the boy's face. — He misunderstands many things. If he concluded things on such friendly level, then the words they had exchanged so far would be meaningless.

Amidst the noise generated by allies and enemies mixing together, Yatori Igsem was staring at the sky while holding her trademark twin sword in her hands.

Standing directly in front of Lieutenant General Safida, she was practically the centre point for the guards. She was confident she could defeat any enemy, no matter which direction they came from.

The tip of her twin swords shuddered like an antenna that had picked up on something. It was because of a small body that was not just content on sliding down the cliff, but was running with a rope in one hand came into sight.

Yatori felt an untimely awe. Even amongst Shinaak tribe who were famed for being nimble, there were not many who would act so recklessly.

“Lieutenant General Safida, do not move from that spot!”

Half way down the cliff, the shadow kicked off the wall. It was a superhuman jump taking advantage of nimble movements, but did not immediately aim for Lieutenant General Safida. Because she had also instinctively sensed the existence of an obstacle she needed to overcome.

“Tyaaaaat!”

A downward strike using gravity and a precise counter which aimed for vital point thrust out from above and below. The moment their blow met each other, steel collided and sparks flew.

“Che…!”

After the first blow was intercepted mid-air, her small, cat-like body landed nimbly.

“… We meet again, red one.”

A pair of kukri in her two hands were too brutish compared to the owner’s small body. But looking at her carefully— beneath that big cape covering her, peeks of a frail yet muscular body that showed off functionality brought awe. Her large eyes, burning with a cause made everyone who looked into them hold their breath. Her black hair faded under sunlight was braided into two strands, left and right. From a glance, her partner sprite didn’t seem to be nearby.

“Yes, we meet again.”

She was cute, but not frail. She had an aura of an experienced warrior about her. It was the kind of a strength that couldn’t be conveyed from a distance when they first met.

Yatori recognized the opponent’s strength, took a stance with her twin swords without showing an opening and revealed her name as per the knight’s code.

“Imperial Army Skirmisher 1st Training Platoon leader cum Light Cavalry 1st Training Platoon leader, Warrant Officer Yatori Igsem. My partner is the fire sprite, Shia. I’m glad to meet you again, young chieftain of the Shinaak tribe.”

“Shinaak Chieftain, Nanak Dar. Hahashik is Hisha of the wind. I responded to your introductions, but don’t get cocky. I won’t remember any of your long and boring titles!”

Nanak Dar made herself clear and aimed the point of her two knives. Yatori took her simple and direct animosity with pleasure.

“It doesn’t matter… Experience the sensation of these blades and die!”

“As if—!”

Nanak ran forward like a loosened arrow. She did not care for the sabre being thrust forward to counter and struck heavily with a kukri as if intending to break the blade. Countering this, Yatori turned her blade to deflect the strike and immediately thrust at the opening. But—

“Ugh…”

At that moment, Nanak Dar used the blade stuck onto ground as a centrifuge to rotate her body and swung for the second attack. It was a series of attack that could not exist in a conventional swordfight. Yatori managed to stand her ground by retreating a little, but the girl’s truly ferocious strikes were just beginning.

“Ryaaaaat!”

The blade on the right was plucked out from the earth and attacked Yatori as it rose instead of going back to the owner. She tried to defend with the handguard of the sabre and go on the offensive, but the blade on the left dived in aiming for her left thigh. Yatori admired her moves. Each attack was unreasonably wide, but there was no opening to drive into.

“What’s up, red one! Can’t move around?”

Nanak Dar’s assault continued. All the officers who wanted to help Yatori by jumping in hesitated and stopped. That bladework was like a windmill with blades attached to it. If they approached carelessly, that would be the end.

On the other hand, Yatori was carefully observing from the middle of the windmill’s attacks. Shifting her centre of gravity with the shaft of the blade, unending rotation, stance to maximize the small stature— receiving the heated blades with a cool demeanor, she analyzed that those would be the key in breaking through Nanak Dar’s swordplay.

Including Igsem’s twin sword style, the majority of sword stances emphasized centre of gravity in the lower body, in other words, the hip. It was because it allowed for the most stabilized offense and defense. It is considered to have an opening when one couldn’t maintain that. Even styles that had various stances, it was considered physiologically impossible to not have the centre in the lower body.

But Nanak had a different method. Amidst her attacks, her centre of gravity was obviously

not in the lower body. That small body being swung around by overly heavy and large kukris maintained form without defying the laws of physics and continually moved while using a sword as the centre of gravity.

— The result was this rotating sword dance.

A blade that slid deep inside sliced a few strands of red hair. To relentlessly attack using the heavy and large pair of kukris, Nanak Dar rarely took the motion of retracting her blade. She continuously kept on the ferocious attacks by finishing a swing to link into a next attack, or stuck the blade into the ground to use as a centrifuge. Those motions gave birth to a unique motion of never-ending rotation of sword.

“You may only be an adept, but I can’t help but admit that it’s excellent.”

Compliments came out from Yatori’s mouth. Along with Shinaak tribe’s hardiness and toned muscles, Nanak Dar’s small stature has created a whole new style of sword fight. Still, no matter how much of an acrobatic stance she maintained, there was no way someone who was limited to circular movement would not reveal an opening to someone who moved in a straight line like Yatori.

The only thing that made her style possible was the lowered stance because of her small size. Compared to Yatori who could only attack downward against a smaller opponent, Nanak could retain her low stance and slash away at the opponent’s lower body. The time for the attack to reach the other would be in Nanak Dar’s favour. That advantage was supplementing the natural delays in the circular motion.

“… Kuuh. Stop it, now!”

Yatori took a blow with the guard on her main gauche and over-extended a little to drive into the circular sword style. If the sword style was focused around rotating, then she only needed to stop the rotation. However—

“No, not going to stop!”

With the kukri stuck in the guard as the centre, Nanak Dar’s body floated up in mid air. The rotation did not die out, but only had its centre axis tilted to a side. Yatori opened her eyes wide at this.

“Is that— you changed to a vertical rotation?”

“That’s correct!”

A final blow utilizing gravity came from above her head. Yatori received the attack by crossing her two swords and reduced the impact on her blades by jumping back a little.

She took a defensive stance thinking the gap between them would be closed instantly, but Nanak Dar unexpectedly stopped moving and simply watched Yatori.

“You’re lasting longer than I expected. I’ve hit you that much, but your blade isn’t broken either…”

“I’m barely holding my ground. It’s amazing. I’m being outclassed by a technique I’ve never seen before.”

“No. You had enough room to watch my skills and be amazed about it.”

Nanak Dar’s expression hardened against an opponent she could not fully measure up. Yatori also felt a likeableness to the opponent who did not underestimate an opponent despite the superiority.

“Seems I can’t help it since I got found out. But what I have now is enough. Preliminary exchange for measuring up is over.”

Yatori readied her twin swords again after speaking without any frill or deception. The atmosphere changed. From a stance focused on defense, she switched to an offensive stance to finish the fight. It was also conveyed to the opponent facing off against her.

“… Are you saying you saw through my techniques. From that short skirmish just now? Load of rubbish!”

“You don’t need to believe everything I say. If you’re a warrior, trust in your abilities and attack.”

A sound of laughter came out from the girl’s mouth. There were no truer words.

— It did not matter even if a swordmaster was here. At this moment she still believed the girl who claimed to have seen through it all would not win against her.

"… That arrogance. I'll make you regret it in hell, red one!"

Nanak Dar rushed forward with certain victory in heart. Compared to that, Yatori waited for the enemy without any movement. The point seemed to be to wait for the opponent to make the first strike and aim for a counter. It was a completely countering stance just like the proclamation that preliminary exchanges were over.

"Ryaaaaat!"

Nanak Dar swung the first strike. It was a powerful strike with all her might to break the blade. But Yatori stepped back to dodge, and the Kukri missed the mark and struck the earth. Using the stuck blade as an axis, Nanak Dar's body circle around. That scene was the same as just before. It was the same horizontal slash from an impossible position that surprised Yatori when she first saw it.

But— the same trick did not work twice.

The blade passed by in front of the thigh. Right after missing an attack, a gap that wasn't exploited for the first time appeared. Nanak Dar's body was still rotating in a circular motion. That small back was open for attack until the rotation finished and the next motion started.

Yatori's knees recoiled and sprung out like a spring. With a rapid step, she thrust the main gauche in her left hand. A killing blow that did not miss an opportunity— it was a true strike that would end the opponent.

"Ha—! Got you, fool—!"

Nanak Dar was aiming for that moment. While showing her back defenselessly, Shinaak tribe's young chieftain was laughing heartily. From her cape covered back, a trap let out its first cry.

A dry sound of air igniting sharply rang out, cutting across the sound of battle.

"Hyaaaaat!"

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A vertical strike from the claymore smashed the head of a Shinaak warrior. They were not even a proper match because their kukri could not handle the massive weight of the sword.

“Wow, amazing… I know it’s sudden, but I’ll have to reclassify you from a mere sandbag.”

“…. What did you say?”

Said Warrant Officer Deinkun as he glanced over. Ikuta tried to gloss things over by simply shaking his head. Truthfully, thanks to Deinkun’s efforts, the damage from Shinaak tribe suicide squad had decreased.

“It seems Torway is managing his job of returning fire properly since the shots from the other side of the cliff lightened up. If we keep this up, we can get through this. Just hold on a bit longer Haro and Matthew.”

“Ye, yeah!”

“I’m so sorry for burdening you!”

From in between Warrant Officer Deinkun and Ikuta, Matthew and Haro replied back.

Ikuta looked around. The battle was continuing, but he felt that the real hump was over. It was something that was exceedingly obvious. If they could withstand the initial shock of the ambush, the scattered enemy coming downhill could be taken out piecemeal.

“To attack with such reckless strategy must mean that Shinaaks are cornered as well… It’s difficult to counter an opponent when you don’t know what they are going to do.”

“Hmph, you sound like a coward. No matter what they do, you can simply wipe out them out as they come.”

Ikuta shrugged his shoulder at Warrant Officer Deinkun's rather simple answer to the situation. That was when a soldier's scream resounded.

"W, what?! It was close by!"

Matthew looked around hurriedly. Their gaze, which had been facing upwards to spot any incoming enemies going down the cliff, was finally back to horizontal view of the surface thanks to that.

They quickly spotted where the scream came from. The soldiers who were standing by the edge positioned behind the officer group, which including Ikuta, were collapsing on the ground bleeding from the right side. At first Ikuta thought it was another round of shots from the other side of the cliff and clicked his tongue, but what followed was astonishing..

The marksmen who wounded them were not on the other side of the cliff, but were here.

"… Reinforcements from below the cliff?! Damn, the troops are preoccupied with what's above.."

Ikuta stood still as he spoke. The soldiers climbing up from below the cliff did not dress much differently from the Shinaak warriors. But their quality was different. From the way they moved as a group to their proficiency on how they handled their carbines, it was obvious that they were highly trained soldiers.

"Sly as always. I will face you head on!"

"…Ugh, don't be too rash, Warrant Officer Deinkun! They're completely different!"

Warrant Officer Deinkun ran forward past Ikuta's warnings and faced the enemy head on.

—There was nothing to fear. Holding the claymore in hand and protected with armour, he was certain that only person who could beat him in close quarter combat was that red haired girl.

One of the enemy who noticed his approach, turned around and stared at him. The man simply pointed the tip of the wind carbine at the giant approaching with a roar.

“Fu, do you think that pea shooter will work on me!”

Warrant Officer Deinkun saw the enemy’s action and covered his face with the sword. Using the large blade as a shield, he protected the head which the enemy would obviously aim for. All vital areas outside the head were well armoured in the first place.

But it was a move that limited his own line of sight as well.

In front of the vision blocked by the sword, the man drew a knife from his waist. It was not a kukri they saw so many times until now. It was a dagger with ominous glint that was thinner and smaller. The man kicked off the ground while holding the dagger in opposite hand from his carbine, the right hand. He made no noise, like a phantom.

“HYAAAAAAH!”

Deinkun swung down his claymore at where the man used to be with all his might. But there was no expected resistance or any blood spurt. The mighty strike finished with simply cutting across the air.

“Hmm…? You, where did you go—.”

The moment Warrant Officer Deinkun tilted his head curiously, a burning sensation cut across his throat without any warning. And a second later, blood gushed out.

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The time between those two were stopped at a critical moment. .

“– You–.”

Shinaak tribal chief, Nanak Dar squeezed out her hoarse voice while looking at the main gauche blade stabbing her in the back with an expression of disbelief.

“How did you…”

“You want to ask how I knew about that trap?”

Maintaining the stance with main gauche in her left hand thrusted out, Yatori lightly slashed with the sabre in her right hand.

The cape that was covering the girl's back slashed in half and what was hidden inside revealed itself. It was a wind sprite fixed with a belt and a mechanism with a very short wind gun barrel. From the pierced area, air was pulsating out.

"I felt some things were amiss. First, you looked like you didn't have a sprite with you. But you properly introduced your partner's name as well during our exchange."

"What…. W, with just that?"

"No, those two occasion were not everything. The moment I started suspecting something is after watching how you fight."

While looking at the pair of kukri in the girl's hands,Yatori continued quietly.

"…Courageous, yet bold style of dual wielding. I was truly amazed by that rotating style of fighting. But as we fought, that boldness felt unnatural. Because while we were fighting, you never bothered guarding your back. Especially in a middle of this melee where you could get stabbed in the back at any time.—"

"— Of course, you might have been thinking about it a little bit, but you were never on guard enough to block an attack coming from behind. Since I was on guard the whole time, something felt even more wrong."

"Kuhh…."

"Not only the Igsem dual wielding style, but the fundamentals of any dual wielder against multiple opponents is that being on guard from an attack from any direction is always a given. When you were being lazy with that, I knew for certain that you weren't someone who only use two swords like me. That you had something hidden behind so you didn't need to worry about your back."

Yatori looked at that hidden card— the sight of a wind sprite pierced along with the barrel of the wind gun.

It did not look to be in pain even after being pierced, but its eyes clearly conveyed the tension. It was not afraid of its own end. That sprite had thrown its body to stop the main gauche. Its partner's death was only a sheet's distance away.

"…."

"The duel's over. Gather your tribe and surrender, Nanak Dar."

Yatori urged her to surrender with a quiet voice. But she did not anticipate for two things here. First, that a girl named Nanak Dar would not accept defeat. Second, how the partner who knew only too well about her, Hisha, would act.

"….. Nana."

Because of the cracks in its body, even the voice calling for its partner was not very clear. But it did not hesitate even with a body centimeters away from being broken. It was always with its partner and to help and protect life— a duty as a sprite— it barely clung onto life wanting to carry it out to the end.

"….?! Wait, what are you..!"

It was that kind of a situation.

"Hisha was it… If you move, your partner will die. Of course, you know that."

Through the main gauche, Yatori could feel a violent vibration carry through to her arm. Right now, Hisha was using a wind sprite's ability to compress air. Even though it knew that its body would not be able to handle it, to make sure its partner will live on to the future. Using the power that Shinaak tribe called it "divine" for. With its final wish—.

"…. Live."

With its final word, wind sprite Hisha exploded itself from internal pressure.

"Kuuh…."

Yatori instinctively took a step back to protect herself from the shrapnel mixed into the wind. Escaping from a dire spot because of her partner's sacrifice, Nanak Dar stood up from her posture that seemed like she was about to fall forward from the explosion, and looked at her shattered partner with a devastated expression.

"….. Hisha…"

It was a voice that was dumbstruck. The sight in front of her eyes and the missing weight from her back played havoc in the girl's mind.

While feeling sympathetic, Yatori's will to capture the girl did not waver. She removed the shrapnel from her arm and walked towards Nanak Dar once again.

"— Don't be too rash, Warrant Officer Deinkun!"

Her ears picked up a familiar boy's shout nearby. When she instinctively looked around, Yatori witnessed the sight near 30 meters away.

The scene of a giant collapsing on his knees spurting blood from the neck while standing straight proudly.

Shadows were passing by as if ignoring that body.

Those coordinated movements showed they were no ordinary people even at a glance. Especially after looking at the man standing in front of the group, an indescribable chilling sensation ran down Yatori's back.

Those shadows cut through all interfering imperial soldiers and advanced without hesitation. They were headed straight towards Yatori, who had Lieutenant General Safida at her back.

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The sight of Warrant Officer Deinkun as he collapsed and the critical amount of blood he was losing registered in Yatori's mind. Her gaze was constantly going back and forth

between him and the enemy. And roughly 4 seconds later—

“…. Ah.”

— Swing your swords

An instinctive feeling from her gut commanded her so.

“…. Arrrgh!”

“Kuugh?!”

Glint of the sword rose like a dragon formed a heated wave to deliver death. The leader of the shadows, who was the first to feel the fiery gale, had to concentrate with all his might to dodge it.

First exchange: deflected the first sabre strike with a dagger - lost sensation in the fingers.

Second exchange: blocked the follow up main gauche attack with the barrel of the carbine - cannot fire anymore due to the hole in the barrel.

Third exchange: parried the third strike which twisted into different direction with the armour on the arms - forearm guards were cracked.

Fourth exchange: shielded against the kick aimed at the lower stomach with two hands - the fourth and fifth digit on right hand have dislocated.

“…Ugh… kuh… ugh!”

The shadow responded without a mistake in the tug of war, which would’ve lead to death if one had made a single wrong move. He barely kept his life, widened their distance and stopped. Below that turban, the face made a surprised expression for the first time.

There was no way that Yatori, who made him make that expression, knew what a rare sight that was.

“… Phuuuu! ”

“Che..!” “…Kuh.”

Two shadows that tried to slip by her side to get to Lieutenant General realized it was a reckless plan and backed off. They could not pass. Yatori’s chilling amount of killing intent drew an invisible line of life and death.

“Matthew’s Squad, surround them!”

An order came from behind in an announcing voice. Ikuta had ordered Matthew’s squad, which was relatively close to the officer group to move.

Between the riflemen who were rushing over people, and the red haired warrior, the leader of the shadows realized it was time to back off. They rushed towards the edge and before any soldier could stop them, every single one of them went down the steep cliff slope without hesitation.

“They j-jumped..?! Ah, damn, they have ropes over here as well!”

Matthew swung his gun down the cliff in anger, but the ropes seemed to be installed some distance away from the edge of the cliff, so he could not reach it. Yatori was also looking down the cliff like him, but looked back after remembering that she had left Nanak Dar unattended.

“… Got away…”

She grinded her teeth. As expected, the disheartened girl who had lost her partner was gone. Did she escape down the cliff along with the shadows or climb up with the help of her comrades.

She thought of possibility of pursuit for a moment before giving up, took in a breath and turned around. She ran towards that spot. Ikuta and Haro were also there. They surrounded Warrant Officer Deinkun, who was keeping a shallow breathing while still being upright.

“– Haro, how is it?”

Haro opened her mouth while standing by the head and trying to stop the bleeding.

“His artery is cut. I’m trying to stop the bleeding, but he already lost too much blood…”

That there was little chance to save him was not in the mood and voice alone, but was also evident around the ground. Around the wound in the neck, there was a puddle of blood about the size of a carpet. It was more amazing that he was still breathing after losing that much blood.

“Dein… Dein… don’t die. No…”

On the other side from Haro, Warrant Officer Deinkun’s partner, water sprite Niki was trying to desperately talk with its partner. He seemed to have heard that voice and tried to move his arm, but didn’t have enough strength to lift it. Yatori moved his hand instead over to the sprite.

“… Yatori. Can you listen to his final words while he’s still conscious.”

“Alright. I’ll do that…”

Yatori took Haro’s place by Deinkun’s head. She whispered to him that she would take his final words and took her ear near his mouth.

Deinkun moved his blue lips to squeeze out words. After hearing those words, Yatori brought her mouth close to his ears and replied. Warrant Officer Deinkun’s head looked like it nodded slightly — and with that, even his shallow breathing stopped. His death and silence ruled that place and even overwhelmed the noise of war.

“… Yatori. Can I ask what his last words were?”

Ikuta asked hesitantly. Yatori replied back in surprisingly light tone.

“There were four in total. “I leave my comrades in the Empire to you”, “I want my partner Niki to go to my sister”, “next time, duel with me properly with those two swords” and the

last one was closer to thinking out loud than a will.”

“Thinking out loud?”

“Yeah. He wondered if he kept his face as a knight.”

Yatori looked up into the sky as to hold back something from coming out of her eyes.

“He’s a modest man. He died an honourable death. There was nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Yeah, he did… What did you say to him?”

Yatori coughed once and replied, speaking with her usual brave but slightly hoarse voice.

“A knight who loved his country and comrade more than anyone, you fought braver than anyone. Deinkun Harguska, may there be blessing and glory upon your soul.”

A fitting eulogy. Ikuta thought that in his head. He could never find good enough words for situations like this.

“Thanks for not saying anything about it. I thought it when I came up with it too, but it seems old fashioned now that I say it again. It looks like fitting words don’t really come out when you need them.”

Ikuta swayed his head at Yatori while smiling bitterly. She was being modest. When asking a knight to deliver a eulogy for a knight, there was no one more fitting than Yatori to deliver those words.

Following her, Torway, Matthew and Captain Sazaruf approached and offered their words one by one before Warrant Officer Deinkun’s body.

The march resumed an hour later and the casualties from the ambush were moved to the rear, with destination for the dead and the living diverging completely.

The dead were going back and the living continued forward. To the next battle. Forward and onward.

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Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 3 - Chapter Prologue

Prologue

Once a year, the sounds of fiddles and drums suffused the Grand Arfatra Mountains in festive cheer.

Shortly before the appointed hour, the Shinaak tribe would split into two groups and accomplish their respective tasks. The youths would descend from the mountain in groups to “pray” at the temple; the elders and children would prepare the delicacies for this auspicious day and await their return.

Once the youths finished their prayers and returned to the village with their spirit companions, the long anticipated Spirit Thanksgiving would commence at dusk. Accompanied by music and song, the entire tribe would throw themselves into the festivities with a gusto. A people normally given to frugality and survived on a small serving of corn starch that could fill the tiniest of containers each day, today was the only day they were allowed to open the storage sheds and celebrate to their heart’s content.

The Shinaak tribesmen prepared places of honor for the spirits, for they were the true centerpieces of this festival. In addition, the Thanksgiving Dance was presented to those who sat upon these honored daises with heartfelt appreciation, a dance that would be conducted by the dancers for three days and three nights.

As for the aforementioned spirits, while they did possess the freedom to move as they will, they instead chose to sit quietly upon their honored daises and accept these heartfelt feelings. —Perhaps they did this because they accurately understood this feeling called “gratitude”? At least, that was the assessment of Anarai Khan from the perspective of a leisurely outsider.

However, it was an adult’s prerogative to enjoy this sort of festival in its entirety, as the children had no place in it after the banquet at sundown. They who were dispatched home at the anointed hour could only enviously listen to the raucous cheers of celebration while reluctantly retiring to their beds.

“Seriously. How~ wily.”

Disgruntled mutters slipped through pouted lips — the young foreigner who had joined Anarai’s expedition to the Grand Arfatra Mountains, the 8 year old Ikta Solork, was no exception.

Amid the pitch dark room bereft of any light, Ikta was covered in a blanket as he lay alone on a stiff bed. The time to undergo a spirit contract was determined by his parents’ discretion, so he was currently without a spirit companion. Even if he had a spirit companion, his counterpart was probably adopting the Shinaak custom and obediently observing the Thanksgiving Dance from its exalted seat.

Ikta really didn’t want to sleep as the corners of his mouth drooped — there was something wrong with Old Man Anarai as well. If he was going to bring up morals like

“children should go to bed early”, then he should have forbidden Ikta from joining this expedition in the first place.

Generally speaking, the Grand Arfatra Mountains was not a place for an 8 year old to challenge. By the time Ikta stepped onto the place that caused him to think “Thank goodness we’re at the top!” and was able to peer into the true peak lurking amidst the clouds above him, he was unable to differentiate whether he was feeling moved or in utter despair.

Fortunately, the village they arrived at was roughly 40% of the way up, but if actually asked to hike the entire way, Ikta may come to reevaluate the science espoused by Anarai to be “the terrifying spirit of child abuse”. No, scratch that, he truly believed that he would probably die in the attempt.

“Given that, what’s with this sort of treatment?”

Ikta continued to verbalize his frustration. The reason why he never complained while participating in such a grueling hike was because of the childish pride he took from “being a member of the expedition”…… Owing to this reason, the youngest “Disciple of Anarai” acknowledged by the professor was highly discontent with the current situation.

“—OK, it’s decided. I’m running away.”

Having made up his mind, Ikta lifted his torso from the bed. While escaping from the room did not mean he had anywhere to go, his mood would surely improve compared to just lurking in the darkness and hoping to snatch a bite somewhere. If fortune favored him, he was also going to try that thing called “wine” that all the adults sought to conceal from him. Given the happiness everyone expressed when enjoying wine, surely it must be delicious—

As he reached out from bed and groped for his shoes, a sudden gust of cold wind swept in from the other side of the room. The ruckus from outside entered a brief crescendo before immediately returning to its original volume.

“—Who is it?”

Comprehending that the door had been opened before swiftly being closed, Ikta asked the darkness as he didn’t believe one of his companions from the expeditionary team had returned. Even in the silence, he could feel the powerful glance the other individual transfixed him with.

The air conveyed clear but gradual movement as the mysterious individual lightly approached Ikta. Just as he was about to warily climb to his feet, his body was tightly clasped by someone from the front.

“Wah!”

Shocked, Ikta reflexively waved his arms and jostled the blinds hanging before the window. For an instant, moonlight penetrated into the dark room. Nonetheless, for eyes that had already grown accustomed to the darkness, that was more than enough light…..

“I am here on a night raid, Ikta!”

The minuscule light within the darkness revealed the luminous smile of a young a girl who

had her arms tightly around Ikta, denying him any possible movement.

“……So it’s you. You gave me a fright, Nana.”

His throat loosening with released tension, Ikta let out a relaxed sigh and called out the other person’s name at the same time.

She had chocolate skin burnished by the sun’s powerful rays and black hair swept into two short pony tails on each side of the face coupled with a round pair of eyes that evoked the sense of a squirrel’s boundless curiosity. Although she was two years older than Ikta, her physical stature that peeked out beneath the short tank top was not vastly different than Ikta’s own.

Her name was Nanak. Since the Shinaak tribesmen generally went without a surname, for now she was just plain Nanak. Shortening the name to Nana was a gesture of closeness — though the only outsider bestowed with this privilege was currently befuddled by the actions before his eyes.

“……So, what is a night raid?”

“What, don’t you know? OK~ I’ll teach you!”

Nanak loosened her embrace behind Ikta’s arms and reached out to take hold of his shoulders in order to turn Ikta’s body towards her. At close proximity, the two of them faced one another and sat back down onto the bed.

“As for what night raid is — during the eve of the Spirit Thanksgiving Festival, women voluntarily seek out men with a promising future ahead of them and request to share a bed!”

“Oh? That I wasn’t aware.”

“Ho ho~ Ikta, you might know a lot, but you do not know the most important things!”

Nanak puffed her chest with a proud look on her features, but her opponent, Ikta, had arrived at the conclusion that this was a unique tradition to the Shinaak Tribe. As a disciple of science, curiosity prompted the youngster to inquire about the details.

“So…… What happens after they share a bed?”

“……Huh?”

“Don’t tell me that’s all there is? Since this was a special request, doesn’t anything happen afterwards?”

Faced with an innocent query perfectly befitting a child’s logic from Ikta, Nanak began contemplating in an even purer fashion.

“Well…… I guess they go to sleep together?”

“Eh~ How boring. Wouldn’t they be unable to do anything after going to sleep?”

“You…… You have a point there……. Then, maybe they talk to one another?”

“That may be so…… But Nana, in short, you also don’t know what happens afterwards, right?”

Ikta cut straight into the heart of the matter, causing Nanak to avert her face as she was temporarily at a loss for words.

“That’s……. That’s not my fault! That’s because Father and Mother as well as my grandparents refuse to tell me what happens next! No matter who I go to, everyone says “You’re know when you’re older” and starts playing dumb!”

“Ho~ ……Refusing to tell children…… Smells like a secret. Specifically choosing the night of the Spirit Thanksgiving that only happens once a year, there must be a reason behind this.”

“Yeah, yeah! They also don’t allow me to try that thing called wine. Adults really like their secrets!”

“Hm, that is true…… Well then~ If so, let’s go outside and give them the shock of their lives—”

Alight with rebellious fire, Ikta was about to rise from bed when Nanak frantically pulled his collar. Owing to this, Ikta fell back onto the bed with a cry of dismay.

“H, hold on a second, Ikta! ……T, That sort of thing, we can do that tomorrow morning!”

“……I say, Nana. What are you thinking?”

“If I knew the answer I wouldn’t have to go through all this! ……Still, I think that since the night raid involves coming to the other person’s sleeping area, wouldn’t this mean that the boy and girl need to be alone?”

“Hm…… I see, you may be onto something.”

“R, right? So…… Even if it’s for a short while, how about the two of us just chat for a bit? Besides from what we talked about before, were there other old tales from Yaponiku that your mother shared with you?”

“If you like, there are a lot of similar stories. Well, let’s see……”

“Ah! Wait a second! Hold on!”

Nanak reached out a hand to halt Ikta just as he was about to speak. Afterwards, she hesitated briefly before looping around to take a seat behind the young man and using her entire body to wrap around Ikta.

Unable to divine the purpose behind such a restrictive action, Ikta opened his mouth to object.

“I say, Nana, this makes it really hard to talk.”

“I, isn’t this just fine? I can hear you perfectly.”

“Forget it, if that’s how you feel…… Is there a point behind this posture?”

“Pay no attention to it. Since I have no idea what to do during a night raid, I’m just going to do what I want to.”

Hearing this, Ikta chuckled wryly before nodding his head and began rummaging through the drawers of his memory to pick the proper story. Acceding to the young girl’s wish to hear a story, it was in this fashion that they continued until the moment the sky began to

brighten — becoming an irreplaceable moment in their young lives that became deeply engraved in their memories.

……And who would imagine that this benign history would suddenly reconnect to this nightmarish present?

Here in the Grand Arfatra Mountains again, the young man and young lady who shared that childhood memory were currently facing one another. What was different from the past — was probably everything besides for the location and individuals involved. The young man of present day was a soldier, whereas the young lady stood here as the chieftain of a tribe. After waging war amidst the bloodshed, they now congregated here from the perspectives of the victor and vanquished.

Within the murky tent, Yatori solemnly loosened the bindings that bound Nanak Dar's hands behind her back. Sitting in front of Nanak, Ikta watched her from a distance where merely stretching out one's hand was enough to brush skin.

"……What are you doing? Why are you untying me?"

Realizing she was now a captive of war, Nanak was bewildered by the events that surpassed any of her expectations. Ikta was the one who answered her.

"That's because regardless of how many times we apologize to someone under restraint, the most favorable interpretation would be an altered form of duress."

Now, another wholly unexpected phrase being issued forth another's mouth caused Nanak to wrinkle her brows.

"Apologize……? For what do you who emerged victorious in this conflict need to apologize towards we who were defeated?"

"For the cruelty our side has inflicted upon yours."

Ikta replied back without hesitation. The utter brazenness and hypocrisy of saying such words to the vanquished filled Nanak with immeasurable fury.

"Bullshit……! You will not find a single man among the warriors of the Shinaak Tribe who was not ready to die in battle! If the victors apologize out of self-aggrandizement, such an action would only insult our warriors!"

A hostile glare centered itself on Ikta. Even Yatori, who stood by on the wings but remained in a position to intervene, felt herself echoing Nanak's anger. This pride was universal among all fighters, but……

"True, if this were the cruelties of war or the harsh measures taken on the battlefield, I would not even consider apologizing here."

Ikta clearly shook his head in order to dispel this misunderstanding.

"First, in relation to the fundamental decision of 'whether or not to go to war against the Shinaak Tribe'. This was the decision handed down by high-ranking officers who possessed the right to attend strategy sessions, so there's no way for us to take responsibility even if we wanted to. Likewise, the righteousness of this war itself can also be described in the same way."

“……?”

“Second, in relation to the independent tactical decisions carried out by the lower-ranking officers, myself included. While the primary objective was to pursue the most efficient methods of wiping out your forces — on that point, I don’t plan on apologizing either. The reason being that this is the way of war. Although this was not according to my wishes, since I am here in the capacity as a soldier, then I must do my part in securing military objectives. I have no intention of excusing myself in that regard.”

Not that I plan on taking pride in that either…… Ikta snidely inserted that line before diving into the main topic.

“That being said, now I speak of the rampage conducted by the soldiers under the direct command of us lower-ranking officers on the front lines — the unnecessary atrocities and slaughter carried out against noncombatants. In regards to this heinous behavior, I must offer my sincere condolences. That is because this event has transcended acceptable military boundaries and, in another manner of speaking, was the result of our inability to rein in our forces.”

Once Ikta finished speaking these words, he used his eyes to signal Yatori. The fiery-haired young woman sighed before pulling out the dagger from the right side of her waist and handed the weapon along with the stool carried beneath her right arm to Ikta.

“I am not so arrogant as to beg your forgiveness here and now, seeing as the dead would not come back to life just because I apologized.”

He placed the stool on the ground as he said this. Innumerous scars and indentations dotted the surface of this tool showed its frequent use for repair work.

“‘My condolences’, ‘sorry’, or ‘my sincere apologies’ — these short phrases do not possess the power to erase human transgression. So then, what is an act of contrition? What does it signify? ……In my youth, there was a time when I deeply considered this question.”

With the palm facing upwards, Ikta spread his left hand across the stool’s surface.

“There was once a similar story — a long time ago, in an era before the wind musket, nay, before even the crossbow had been invented, there lived a hunter on the Great Arfatra Mountains. His skill with the bow was so incredible that he could strike down a deer on the mountain next to the peak he was standing on. Everyone in the mountains was in awe of his talent, and all the animals on the mountain feared him…… However, he grew arrogant due to his ability, until one day he accidentally struck a young village girl who interposed between him and his prey.”

Nanak’s chest tightened as she listened to the young man tell his story, but she was not able to immediately identify that this was nostalgia.

“Faced with the young girl who fell due with a serious wound, the hunter deeply regretted his pride. He offered vast amounts of goods and gifts as well as spoke the most contrite phrases of apology, but the father of the young girl refused them all and said: ‘No matter how much is prepared, gifts are only objects; no matter how many words you say, they are only restricted to your tongue. Where is the most important thing, your sincerity?’ ……

Then, he gave a small knife to the hunter.”

As Ikta spun his tale, for some reason his pinky was tightly wrapped in rope. Blood circulation was blocked from the fingertip, causing the finger to become deathly pale.

……Realizing that the circumstances fit tradition perfectly, Nanak’s entire body stiffened.

“The hunter looked upon the knife his hand and arrived at the answer himself — the first duty of the one who erred was to guarantee that he or she would never repeat the same mistake. Only when he was in a position to ensure this guarantee would the path to reparation be open…… It was at this moment the hunter realized what the other side wanted him to do with the knife. With this, he could truly guarantee that he would never repeat the same error.”

The blade emitted a brief flicker as it was placed against the first digit of the little finger as the right hand holding the dagger began applying pressure.

“……Hmph—!”

The cut was not a clean bisection. The blade came to a halt upon reaching bone and the skin was still attached, so until the digit was entirely severed, he had to repeat the motion two more times. Even though the blood loss was greatly reduced due to the preparations before hand, the rope bindings serving as a stand-in for anesthesia could not entirely erase the pain of the cut. The nerves connecting his fingertip to the brain had turned into a highway of pain.

“……. Hrn–-!”

Once the painful peak passed, Ikta was barely able to recover his breath before continuing his narrative.

“……The hunter chopped away the ring and little fingers of his right hand and kept the three fingers that were absolutely vital to pulling a bow. The father of young girl asked, ‘Is this because you are unable to abandon that?’ The hunter shook his head and replied, ‘It is true that cutting off those three fingers would render a misfire impossible. Yet, that would also render reparation impossible. A mistake made as a hunter can only be recompensed by a living a correct life of a hunter. Abandoning the bow would the same as fleeing from the error. Thus, I have cut away the two unnecessary fingers that symbolize my pride and shall view the remaining three fingers on my right hand as an eternal warning.’ It is said that the determination behind those words convinced the young girl’s father and he finally accepted the hunter’s will to atone.

Since then, “slicing off fingers” as a method of atonement became a tradition among the Shinaak Tribe — that was the story you told me, Nana.”

“……! W, wait a minute, you are……!”

Ikta did not wait for Nanak’s memories to recover entirely and placed the dagger’s edge along the second digit of his little finger. This there there was also no hesitation. He put his entire weight behind the downward push and even went one step further sawing the edge of the blade back and forth. The sound of his teeth grinding back forth to combat the pain was to the point that the teeth shatter against one another.

“Whew…… Ugh……! ……My thanks to the hunter within that story. If he had cut off his thumb, then I would be facing a situation where I must forfeit my head. That’s because my errors as a commander, regardless of the cognitive thought or the physical order, both originated above the neck—”

Ikta took twice the amount of time to remove the second digit compared to the first one. Afterwards, he switched the blade over to the edge of the short stump that was barely a third in length of the finger. The rope serving as anesthesia had long since lost its effect and fresh blood oozed forth from the gory wound onto the stool. Off to a side, Yatori could only watch the proceedings with a dismayed expression.

Though plainly no one ordered him to do so and no one would hold it against him if he faltered halfway, Ikta remained steadfast. After a desperate effort, he practically tore apart apart the last scrap of flesh and bone yet conjoined. Practically at the same moment that the dagger slipped from his right hand, Yatori bound forward and began dressing the wound.

Nanak tore her eyes from the three fleshy bits atop the stool towards the face of the young man who had forever bid farewell to his flesh and asked in a trembling voice.

“……What…… is your name……?”

“I am Warrant Officer Ikta Solork of the Imperial Army…… Many events transpired since we last met, hence why I bear a different surname than before.”

The young man even wore a grin as he volunteered his name while large tear drops fell from Nanak’s eyes.

“……You…… are Ikta……? Truly…… that……?”

“Yep…… Long time no see, Nana. Although this is entirely the wrong time, you’ve became really beautiful.”

The instant those words registered into her hearing, Nanak immediately pulled her gaze away from the young man’s for, lowering her head in a desperate effort to control some emotion threatening to burst forth. Although Ikta shared her sentiments entirely, he kept his gaze steady.

“……Yatori, you don’t have to keep bandaging me. Return these to her.”

“Understood.”

After finishing treatment, Yatori rose and removed a small bundle containing a tiny rectangular object from her uniform.

“Here, with our compliments.”

Nanak wore a confused expression as she accepted the object Yatori offered her and tentatively unwrapped the bundle. However, she held her breath when her eyes ran over the black rectangular shape within.

“This…… this wouldn’t be……”

“This is your companion, the soulstone of the spirit Sya. After the previous engagement, we were fortunate enough to successfully recover this.”

When she heard those words, Nanak let out a choked sob as she pressed her forehead to the soulstone. Her lost other half had returned — that sublime belief sent a shiver through her entire body.

“Nana, in return for the three severed digits, I hope you can accept these three one-sided proposals from our side.”

Currently, she did not possess the leisure to formulate an answer. Ikta pressed onward fully aware of the wretchedness of his actions.

“The first condition was mentioned earlier, as we request your acceptance regarding the travesties conducted by our forces. The second condition is that we hope the Shinaak Tribe can provide assistance in defending against the Holy Aldera Army invading from the north.”

“……What!”

Her duties as a chieftain forced the distressed Nanak to raise her head. In order to show her actions the proper respect, Ikta also began negotiating from the stance of a Warrant Officer of the Imperial Army.

“Ra Sai Alderamin dispatching troops at this juncture…… I’m sure you are aware of the significance of this act? Those guys are looking to press the advantage with the Northern Garrison and the Shinaak Tribe exhausted from their protracted struggle. Strictly speaking, the Holy Aldera Army is also a pawn in the game, with the true instigator being the Kioka Republic. Just as the ones who taught you all guerrilla tactics also came from Kioka.”

“W, what……! You mean those guys from Alderamin are coming over God’s Stairway to invade the Empire……?”

“I too would be skeptical had I not witnessed it with my own eyes, so I can only say we all lacked foresight on the matter…… However, you do understand the situation, correct? Those guys are here to annihilate us. In the name of “saving spirits”, they seek to shatter the Shinaak Tribe and the Northern Garrison at the same time.”

Within that steely assessment, Ikta seamlessly included his own analysis. Exactly how the Holy Aldera Army would treat the Shinaak Tribe was dependent on the enemy’s strategic objectives. If this young man was fighting for the other side, he would first seek an alliance with the Shinaak Tribe to establish a working relationship and inciting them to continue resistance efforts against the Northern Garrison. This increased the number of potential allies while exhausting their respective fighting strength and was likely the most efficient approach.

Nevertheless, it was Ikta’s hypothesis that there was less than a 50% chance the enemy would adopt this strategy. Ra Sai Alderamin was a deeply religious and highly orthodox country. Based on that quality, even if they were only strategic allies of convenience, it was highly doubtful that they would show leniency towards the heretical Shinaak Tribe.

……That being said, given that they had allied with the Kioka Republic, a country founded on technological advancement that gradually ran counter to Aldera dogma, this preconception could also be overturned. Precisely because of this, Ikta absolutely needed to fully utilize his personal relationship with Nanak Dar and strike first.

“If you are willing to assist our forces against the Holy Aldera Army, I can guarantee the position of the Shinaak Tribe in the Empire afterwards. It is inevitable that the Grand Arfatra Mountains will be conquered by the Holy Aldera Army, so our side will provide another area for settlement. Given that the Empire has more land than it knows what do with, there will be no problem finding somewhere that meets all the criteria.”

“……Is this your personal proposal? Or……”

“This is of course the united consensus of the Northern Garrison and we have also obtained approval from the commanding officer, Lieutenant General Safida. So long as I am alive, this covenant will not be overturned. Additionally, another authority can also provide support for this.”

Besides for his position as an “Imperial Knight”, the current Ikta could also call upon his connection with Princess Chamille. Deftly employed, these assets should be able to give him enough clout even when haggling with the country itself…… The caveat was that the perquisite involved him surviving the crisis before him.

“I am afraid there’s no time for you to deliberate. Please make your decision, Chief of the Shinaak Tribe.”

Ikta pressed Nanak for an answer. Being forced into a major decision, Nanak wracked her brain for a moment before asking a question of her own.

“……Wasn’t there one more?”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you slice the little finger into three parts? Thus far I have only heard of two ‘one-sided proposals’.”

“Oh……”

That was a shrewd observation. Using his unblemished right hand to scratch his scalp, Ikta let out a wry chuckle.

“This is probably the most important one too. If possible, I would like to continue calling you Nana in the future.”

Nanak’s sense of time ground to a halt. Even Yatori observing the negotiations to one side pressed a hand to her forehead with an expression of disbelief on her face.

“……You…… Don’t tell me…… Just for that, you increased the number of things that needed to be taken care of from two to three……?”

“The first and the second were actions demanded of me as a soldier, whereas the third was atonement as a friend…… In all honesty, even though this is tradition, I really didn’t want to give such a bloody gift to a lady.”

The young man said this as he lowered his head to gaze at the severed parts of his own body. Nanak could only sigh at that.

“……If only you had become an insufferable person, I wouldn’t have to trouble myself over all this……”

“Really? It was precisely because you became such a wonderful lady, that I could cut off

my little finger without an ounce of hesitation.”

The wry smile that came after those words coincided perfectly with the expression in her memory, serving as the final motivator to bolster Nanak’s decision.

“……I understand. Then I, Nanak Dar, accept your three one-sided proposals on behalf of the Shinaak Tribe.”

“……My word, you do know that the finger you cut off will never grow back, correct?”

Three thousand meters above the ground, the mountains sat beneath a sky so blue it veritably gave men the chills. Immediately after leaving the tent, the fiery-haired young woman sidled along Ikta and began lecturing him in an irate tone as they paced ahead.

“Huh……! H, how can that be! Why did you warn me ahead of time!?”

“Oh my, my apologies for not being thoughtful enough. And here I thought that ‘Anarai’s Box’ had some sort of all-purpose adhesive that could reconnect parts of the human body.”

Hearing the young man feign madness even at this time, Yatori averted her gaze as though she clearly had enough. Realizing that his joke had gone too far, Ikta switched gears and verbalized his real thoughts.

“No, I’m the one who should be apologizing. Just like the Kioka Incident, every time I borrow your dagger I swing the blade at something outrageous.”

“In truth, compared to severing a comrade’s finger, cleaning frogs is infinitely preferable…… However, that’s not the question at hand. The point is why did you need to take things so far in the first place?”

Highly distressed, Yatori turned her eyes onto the left hand that was short a finger, to which Ikta chuckled wryly and shook his head.

“My hand was forced. Nana is a smart girl, but right now we don’t have the time to persuade her with logic. Since we are requesting assistance from opponents who were still hostile to us yesterday, in order for them to accept our one-sided conditions, a performance capable of resonating with Shinaak aesthetic ideal was absolutely necessary.”

“I am referring to how odd it is for you to take full responsibility for everything. The rampaging allied unit was not under your command, so wouldn’t logic require the commanding officer on site bear the responsibility instead?”

“What you say makes sense, but having ‘me’ make the apology just now does have its own significance. Rather, negotiating with Nana would only succeed going through me, so the situation naturally developed this way.”

While she could rationalize the young man’s explanation, Yatori still wore an expression that signified she found this difficult to stomach. That was because she was unable to bear the thought of her comrade being sacrificed while she herself got away unharmed.

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Since this was an unavoidable wound, then she should be the to bear the burden — that was Yatori’s pride as a knight. Ikta was perfectly aware of this aspect of Yatori’s

personality, but he still clearly shook his head in the negative.

“My little finger and yours are on entirely different levels of value. Clueless as I am at close quarters combat, even I know that holding a sword starts from the little finger. In our current circumstances, any loss in your fighting ability is a serious detriment. Comparatively, so long as I still have everything above the neck, even losing the little finger would not inconvenience me too badly.”

“……Even if that’s the case, wouldn’t that be a problem in the future?”

“In regards to that, so long as I still have my index and middle fingers, I won’t have any problems in bed at least.”

Upon hearing her counterpart cracking jokes in his usual irreverent manner, Yatori snorted and curbed her tongue. The two of them happened to arrive at the command tent at this time, only to find that they were beginning to pull camp and only a few familiar officers were in attendance.

“Ah, Ik-kun! How did it go?” “Were the negotiations successful?”

Torway and Matthew hurried over the instant their eyes met. Ikta casually kept his left hand out of sight and smiled without saying a word. Inferring that everything went well based on this attitude, the two of them sighed in relief.

“……Though the future if fraught with peril, being able to call upon the Shinaak Tribe for assistance will be a tremendous help.”

“They said that there should be 500 men in two days and 800 after five…… Of course, this is thanks to the popular support Nana has as chieftain, though Captain Sazaruf’s contributions should not be overlooked either. Thankfully, since the village was spared from the torch and the inhabitants gathered together instead of slaughtered, this saved us the hassle of gathering any scattered manpower.”

“Thanks for the compliment. Its absolutely astounding that I would be thanked for engaging in this ridiculous battle.”

How apt? Speak of the devil and he shall appear. Captain Sazaruf approached the group with a RYO cigarette dangling between his lips with Haro trailing a few steps behind him.

Excluding Haro, the other members of the Knights Club formed themselves into a row and saluted their superior officer in unison.

“Hey, now you guys actually look a bit more like soldiers. Practically night and day from the time all of you were on base.”

“If that is the case, I am certain it is all thanks to your tutelage, Captain.”

“Ha, easy on the jokes…… Even if I didn’t offer any guidance, you all would have made it, right? In spite of that, now you have got me here at the short end of the stick.”

Lieutenant Sazaruf expelled a cloud of white smoke filled with self-ridicule and defeatism from his mouth before continuing onward.

“OK, let’s change the topic…… Our esteemed Lieutenant General Safida, the Garrison Commander who was the first to bail on us, has decided to confer an amazing gift upon

each of you.”

“If you are referring to one-way tickets to Hell, we’re still puzzling over how to get rid of the tickets we got earlier.”

The captain got a chuckle out of Yatori’s sarcasm that was laced with more than a healthy dosage of spice.

“……The ones receiving these gifts may view this as real estate from Hell, but at least it does serves a purpose from a practical standpoint. —So, first up are Warrant Officer Ikta, Warrant Officer Yatori.”

“Here, sir!” “Yes, yes, yes……”

“Field promotions for the two of you. From this point, the two of you are 1st Lieutenants. Congratulations.”

Pah, pah, pah…… Captain Sazaruf clapped in a lackluster manner. At this plainly obvious development, Ikta and Yatori were too lazy to sigh and were even on the cusp of yawning.

“Next up we have Warrant Officers Matthew, Torway, and Haro. From this point, you are all promoted to 2nd Lieutenants.”

“Oh……” “Ah…… Yes, sir!” “That was sudden!”

The three of them responded differently, but were united in the sense of depression, causing Captain Sazaruf to sigh.

“What~ You should all be happier! You guys are the first ones to be promoted in your cohort and can crow about it when you get home.”

“Yes, we can crow about it when we get home if we actually make it home.”

As if recalling the despair looming at the back of his mind, Matthew’s tone grew bleaker. Ikta and Yatori thought back to the situation that caused his depressed state — the military conference that had just finished an hour ago.

“—Anyone! Does anyone have a suggestion!?”

Even with Lieutenant General Safida’s hysterical screams, the crowd of staff officers within the tent hunkered down and stayed quiet. During this entire time, the enemy army creeping closer from the north.

The news that the Holy Aldera Army was on approach caused a tremendous shock among the members of the Northern Garrison who had just relaxed from the protracted struggle with the Shinaak Tribe. Everyone from the rank and file to the officers felt the blow, so given the current hour, perhaps their panicked mob mentality was only a matter of course.

“Don’t just sit there, I want to hear suggestions! Do any of you understand the situation? The enemy is at the gates! The foot of the Grand Arfatra Mountains will be right in front of them once they get through the trails of Gagarukasakan Forest!”

In addition, the commander-in-chief responsible for bringing order back into the ranks was in a similar state before their eyes.

“Are we going to withdraw entirely or throw the dice and repel them! Shouldn’t you guys be able to assess a small thing like which one of these offer the high chance of success?!”

Despite Lieutenant General Safida frothing at the mouth in fury, the beauty of it all was that he was not consciously aware of the problem’s focal point. Regardless of whether they were withdrawing or retaliating, both options were bereft of any chance of success. Besides from the Lieutenant General himself, everyone present was aware of that fact, hence why everyone kept their peace.

Based on Torway’s observations and assessment, it would take the Holy Aldera Army just over five days at a minimum to enter the Grand Arfatra Mountains and attack the Imperial Army. In comparison, no matter how they reran the numbers, the Imperial Army needed at least 20 days to fully retreat from the battle zone. A swift comparison between the two numbers clearly showed that simply fleeing would undoubtedly end in enemy attack during the retreat.

As for whether fending off the enemy held a higher chance of success, this was also a desperate gamble. Based on confirmed reports alone, the Holy Aldera Army had mobilized troops northward of 12000. In contrast, the Empire had already been decimated by the internal conflict with the Shinaak Tribe and their original troop count of 18000 was now tragically below 8000.

The enemy was one and a half times their number already, without going into the fact that the Imperial forces were already exhausted by continuous warfare. Taking into consideration that they were also desperately short on supplies, the absolute difference in firepower between the two sides does not bear further mention.

“……Captain, the situation will not improve at this current rate.”

“Keep it down. If you want to return alive, do not even think about jumping into the ring and clarifying the situation.”

Hearing Yatori’s whisper, Captain Sazaruf minutely shook his head. Within the cramped confines of the command tent, chairs were only for high-ranking staff officers while everyone else from captains on down remained on their feet while listening to the meeting progress.

“On that regard, although I do want to agree with your point of view, Captain…… But if this keeps going on, we may get to the point that the meeting adjourns only to find that our forces have been completely surrounded by the enemy.”

Ikta said this with a sigh. Under a pincer attack from his two subordinates, Captain Sazaruf scratched his scalp with a gusto.

“……Spare me, guys. You all and I have clearly overworked ourselves up to this point, no? What valid reason do we have to keep drawing the short end of the stick?”

“We are soldiers. I fear that more than constitutes a valid reason.”

Yatori’s gaze was highly forthright. The captain sought to escape this pressure, but on the other side he had Ikta’s pair of pitch black eyes waiting for him. He had no where to run.

“……It’s only a matter of sooner or later, isn’t it, Captain? If we don’t come up with a

plan and this turns into the Holy Aldera Army pouring into the north after hiking over the Grand Arfatra Mountains, then all we can do is join in the defense…… No matter how impossible the situation becomes.”

“……”

“I am of the belief that since we still have the opportunity to determine our destiny, intentionally drawing the short straw is still better than having others dictate our future. The point here is that there is a proper time for sloth.”

“……You make it sound so easy, but we’re up against 12000 men. Do you have a concrete plan in place to handle so many?”

“Yes. Yatori and I just came up with a countermeasure.”

These two officers each pressured their superior from their unique standpoints. As if finally caving in, Captain Sazaruf raised his head to the heavens and held that position for ten seconds as if steeling himself for the plunge.

“You bunch over there! You have been nattering for a while now, do you have something to say!?”

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Lieutenant General Safida vented his spleen on the officers from the lower ranks whose names he didn’t even know. Internally mocking himself for this perfect opening, Captain Sazaruf raised a heavy right hand straight into the air.

“……I do have a suggestion. Based on our current situation, we should leave a detachment as a rearguard in attempt to half the enemy advance.”

A ruckus broke out within the tent. The staff officers that had hitherto remained silent each wore an expression of “this guy actually said it aloud” and all began speaking as if waking from a long dream.

“Hm…… He’s right, that’s the only way.”

“In that case, who should command in the field……?”

“This is a sticky decision, though we also have to consider the unit size……”

Though there were voices in all the chatter, no one seemed to be eager to take on this assignment. Highly put out by the gazes all directed towards him, Captain Sazaruf plowed forward with his explanation nonetheless.

“……The Holy Aldera Army is approximately 12000 in number. The purpose of our retreat is to return to our homebase in the north in order to regroup and meet the enemy, so a corresponding amount of soldiers must make it out. Conservatively speaking, it will take at least a month for Central to marshal enough reinforcements. Therefore, the number of soldiers sufficient to hold out in the north during this time, including the remnants still in the various bases in the area, would probably be just above 6000 men or so……”

Since Captain Sazaruf did not have experience commanding large bodies of troops, he was not entirely confident in this number. However, the fact that not a single staff officer offered any objections served as proof for his assertion.

“In that case, the maximum size of the rearguard would be the 2000 or so men left from the 8000 after removing the 6000 defenders. The next issue would be how to utilize this unit……”

As for the next phase, the captain actually had no idea. At this time, Yatori stepped forward to take on this burden.

“Captain, may I continue explaining?”

“Ah…… Uh…… I’ll leave it to you. —My apologies, my aide will take over now.”

Since a mere Warrant Officer would never be allowed to speak during a strategic conference, Captain Sazaruf intentionally gave Yatori the opening by implying “she was just expressing what I wanted to say”. Even left before the astounded gazes of the staff officers, Yatori mentally thanked the captain for this opening while fearlessly pressing onward.

“First of all, the majority of the rearguard would naturally be deployed along the defensive perimeter on the mountains. When faced with the Holy Aldera Army climbing the mountain range from the north, we will adopt the strategy of erecting fortresses along their march — in other words, we are modifying the tactics the Shinaak Tribe used against us for our own purposes.

Yet, given the well-fortified defenses the Shinaak Tribe erected facing the south, it would be a logical assumption that the defenses facing northward would be considerably weaker because they were never expecting an attack from that direction. While we must adopt field preparations to make up for the deficiencies, with the enemy reaching our position in five days, it is frankly impossible for us to make it in time.”

Here, Yatori took a breath. Already inferring what was going to happen next, Captain Sazaruf softly muttered, “You have got to be kidding.”

“As such, before the defensive battle required to buy time for the entire army to retreat, another defensive stand must be made to obtain the necessary time to fortify. The number allotted to this unit will be whatever is left from the 2000 needed for fortification purposes…… which is around about a company of 600 men. Any less would render the mission impossibly difficult, whereas any more would impact the field preparations on the mountain range.

Lieutenant General Safida read between the lines of Yatori’s words. His eyes widened as he replied back.

“So you mean…… Requesting a mere company of 600 men to hold off an enemy force of 12000 while the field preparations are finished.”

“This is not a request. This is mandatory because we have no other options.”

“……Since you dare to say that, surely you have a more concrete plan to buy time?”

“We will use fire.”

Yatori did not hesitate with her reply. After accepting the map seamlessly handed to her by Ikta, she unfurled the map so everyone could see.

“As the Lieutenant General said earlier, the trails north of the Grand Arfatra Mountains

leads into the Gagarukasakan Forest. Since this sea of trees is wider running east to west, the Holy Aldera Army must pass through this forest or else take a very long detour. Ergo, if our forces set this forest ablaze, we can utilize a wall of fire to halt the enemy army."

"W, what…… Setting the forest alight……!"

This audacious suggestion shocked the staff officers, even prompting Captain Sazaruf's jaw to drop.

"This is just enlarging the scale of the fire perimeter duties normally carried by the Incendiary Corps. The Gagarukasakan Forest has not been developed for large troop movement, so there is only one wide road we need to law a fire perimeter across. Furthermore, this is a dry forest bereft of any moisture except during the rainy season, making it the ideal location for a fire attack."

"This would lead to a wildfire! How can this be controlled with only 600 men —"

"Ah, I will explain the manpower issue. Our insufficient numbers will filled in by petitioning the Shinaak Tribe."

Ikta's addition caused all the skeptical gazes from the staff officers to congregate onto him.

"Calling upon the Shinaak Tribe for assistance……? What is this farce? That's not something that can be done in one day!"

"Actually, that's not the case, because Chieftain Nanak Dar is among the captives. As long as we can convince them the Holy Aldera Army is our common enemy and guarantee the Shinaak Tribe's position and rights in the Empire, she doesn't have any reason not to accept based on her position as chieftain. Once the negotiations are complete, I will allow her to gather men from the village to our rear and instruct her tribesmen not to obstruct the Imperial Army defending against the Holy Aldera Army."

If placed in a situation where they could be stabbed in the back by the remnants of the Shinaak Tribe, any talk of a defensive position would immediately collapse. Under that context alone, successfully convincing Nanak Dar was an absolutely necessity for this operation.

"Even if you could successfully convince the Shinaak Tribe, can you guarantee that there will be no problems with the fire perimeter throughout the entire forest? It's impossible to gauge the extent the fire will spread!"

"T, that's right! Depending on the wind, there is a possibly our forces will be harmed by the flow of the fire. What if it rains in the middle? Wouldn't that put us back to square one?"

Faced with the horde of blustering officers, Ikta mentally snorted in derision.

"……Such a thing will not come to pass. First, this area is still in the dry season. Though it is nearing the end, there is still at least half a month before we can expect any rain. There is an extremely low probability at our current time frame that we will be hampered by a rainstorm."

"Uh…… What about the change in wind direction? Winds atop the mountain can be

highly unpredictable!”

“Even taking into consideration of impacting other areas, all of this is within expected parameters. The real problem would be if the wind is too weak to adequately spread the wildfire…… Well, worrying about either scenario would be moot. The reason for that is because during this time, the winds along the northern Grand Arfatra Mountains are all southwestern winds blowing down the slopes.”

“What did you say……? How can you be sure of that?”

“Have you heard of chinook winds before? As its name suggests, this type of wind climbs the mountain on one side and blows down the mountain on the other. So long as a strong gust is blowing on one side of the mountain, wind coming down the other side of the mountain is inevitable…… With the areas in southern and central Katjvarna currently in the rainy season, I am sure everyone here has felt the winds blowing over the mainland from the southwestern seas.”

Next to the young man explaining the situation, Captain Sazaruf made the connection and clapped his hands.

“……That’s it! The fall winds!”

“That’s correct. The winds that bring the rainy season for the mainland will bring that same blessing into the northern region in another month from now…… No, although the rain has not yet come, the wind itself can be felt. The fall winds will climb along the face of the Grand Arfatra Mountains then turn into chinook winds and rush down the northern facing. Based on that phenomenon, the fires we set should even spread out before the approaching enemy.”

Well? Ikta visually inquired. With the tide of resistance ebbing from the staff officers, he wordlessly poked his superior officer in the bank. Reading Ikta’s cue, Captain Sazaruf solemnly began to speak.

“……Since the one who made the proposal should bear the responsibility, I, Senpa Sazaruf, request to be appointed the officer in charge of carrying out this operation. What is your decision, Lieutenant General……?”

“……My apologies for burdening you with this.”

Even Ikta was unable to joke about this…… Continuing watching the hand wringing in the military conference would only result in death, that was beyond question. However, that drawing the short end of the stick was necessary to avoid the worse case scenario was a lamentable situation in the extreme.

“…….Hm? Hey, this isn’t like you at all. Don’t give me that expression. Though you guys were the ones who pushed me, ultimately I was the one who made the call, wasn’t I?”

Captain Sazaruf chuckled dryly and put a hand on top of Ikta’s head. At the very least, his face showed no signs he regretted his decision.

“Using a single company of 600 men to throw back an enemy force of 12000! Wouldn’t it be amazing if we really pull it off? Speaking of which, I can’t believe myself. Living to an

age like this and still trying to be a hero.”

After a round of self-derision, the captain adopted a serious expression and turned his eyes onto the others.

“Switching gears — Lieutenant Matthew, Lieutenant Horo. If you like, the two of you can retreat to the rear.”

“What……?”

Haro seemed to have already gotten the memo, so the only who wore a shocked response was Matthew alone. With a grave expression, Captain Sazaruf continued explaining to the befuddled Matthew.

“The two of you are very diligent and, amidst the situation where other officers and cadets fell one after another, have accomplished your mission of surviving. This is, after all, the first tour of duty you have undergone.”

“No…… But…… Hasn’t the rearguard forces been decided already……?”

“Technically, it’s being drafted as we speak. Currently, I have the authority to pull in outside forces to take your spots. Seeing as none of them have done as much as you guys so far, don’t feel too bad about it.”

Faced with a sudden path of egress, Matthew could only stand there in a daze. At this time, Yatori also offered her two cents.

“Matthew, may I also chime in? After watching you from a close distance, I must say I am impressed. You remained calm even during repeatedly desperate straits and provided the leadership for your soldiers to fight bravely. This is the performance of an exemplary commander in anyone’s eyes. Take pride in this.”

Matthew turned wide eyes onto Yatori. Up until this moment in his life, he had never received such unreserved praise from Yatori.

“Haro is the same. With mountain sickness running rampant along the frontlines, your work ethic and performance were exemplary. If not for Haro’s unit, our own units would undoubtedly have shockingly high casualties.”

“……It’s been an honor.”

“The two of you would undoubtedly be fine commanders. —Precisely because of this, here is where you should learn when to retreat.”

The words of departure that opened with praises struck deeply into their chests. Ikta continued on.

“Yatori has already said the words I wanted to say…… However, Torway, I owe you an apology here. The Wind Gunners equipped with wind rifles are irreplaceable, so there is no way for you to leave. Best chalk it up to your own bad luck, but let’s work together moving forward.”

Although Ikta’s mood was dark as he said this, Torway actually nodded with a proud expression across his features. On the other hand, the assessment of “irreplaceable” awarded to Torway struck a blow on the young man who did not win the same honors.

“At any rate, owing to these reasons, we shall bid a temporary farewell to you two. I don’t know when the next time will be, but if possible, I would like to share a drink in Central — Wah!”

Ikta was planning on finishing his statement, but Matthew suddenly rushed forward and lifted him by the collar. Torway and Haro were about to intervene, but Yatori shook her head and halted them.

“……You see yourself entirely as the guardian. It’s too dangerous so go home first? Who the hell do you think you guys are……!?”

“Ow ow ow…… Well…… You know, basically Yatori and I are now 1st Lieutenants……”

“Oh, right, here the two of you are ranking officers, that I can admit. That being said, under these circumstances, would a superior officer tell his troops “it’s too dangerous, go home”? Would they use an excuse like “here is where you should learn when to retreat” to tell them to run? Bullshit! You know that’s impossible!”

Matthew kept his hands locked onto Ikta’s collar while shaking him like a rag doll. Ikta could only allow Matthew to do as he willed.

“Let me verify one thing! Up until the battles now, have I really been a burden?”

“……No, you have been a reliable comrade.”

Ikta’s dark eyes looked directly forward as he made this declaration. Without any hesitation, Yatori echoed his sentiment with a nod.

“Given that! At this time, what you should say to your comrades is not “you run away first”!”

This sentence was more like an angry howl. There was no disguise or embellishment within, and it was precisely this reason that it convinced the others.

One person remained suspended in mid air while the other stood there without moving a muscle. Ikta and Yatori found themselves both troubled over the same issue.

“……We will be faced with a harrowing battle, Matthew.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not going to be like before. You’re going to lose a lot of your subordinates.”

“Yeah.”

“You yourself will be exposed to danger. A single mistake will kill you, just as bad luck will also kill you.”

“Yeah.”

“Even if everything miraculously proceeds according to plan, there is still a chance that all of us still wind up dead.”

“I know that!”

A stubbornness welled up within Matthew’s heart, forcibly shoving aside all hesitation. At

the same time, he thought…… it's time to admit to the difference in level. At least the current gap in their abilities was something he had to accept, albeit reluctantly.

In spite of this, they were all equal as comrades. Only this sense of pride was a creed that he would never let go.

"You guys must be planning on doing something about all this, right? Would I be a burden?"

In that instant, both Ikta and Yatori were filled with shame. The targets of said shame were they who a few minutes ago could not recognize Matthew's determination and careless words that trampled over his feelings. So, there was only one thing to say now.

"—I retract my earlier words. My sincere apologies, my friend Matthew."

"I too must apologize for my earlier rudeness. In the following battle, please lend us your strength."

After hearing this, Matthew loosened his hands around Ikta's collar.

"Seriously, you guys should have said this from the very beginning."

Faced with Matthew turning his face aside and muttering in displeasure, Ikta could only apologize again. On the other side, Yatori turned her eyes onto Haro.

"Haro, no matter how we put it, that was Matthew's answer. While it is your choice to emulate him, please remember not to be too affected by it and make a decision based on who you are. Even now, my proposal surrounding the hour of retreat has not changed."

Yatori used a stringent tone to query Haro. In contrast to her expectations, Haro had a ready reply.

"I will also stay. If the situation is that desperate, then all the more reason for me to help."

"Haro……"

"Honestly, if Mr. Matthew had been forcibly evacuated to the rear, I was planning on acting in concert with him. If I was accused of "being unneeded because I'm a burden", I really can't deny that."

Haro fiddled with her watery blue hair and revealed a bashful smile.

"But, if that's not the case…… If there's anywhere I can help, but allow Mr. Matthew and I to insist. To me, the "Knights Club" is an important place to cling to. Even for a short while, please allow me to help to protect that."

With that, Haro inclined her head deeply, to which Yatori swiftly raised her up.

"I am the one who should bow, Haro. I am sorry for acting in a manner that looked down upon your determination."

"As a fellow member of the "Knight's Club", I will also be relying on everyone's strength moving forward."

Ikta stepped over and put a hand on Haro's shoulder, who nodded while using the uniform sleeve to dab away at the corners of her eyes.

“……Ah~ To be young again. If this were five years ago, I might be one of you guys.”

Captain Sazaruf, who had been watching the proceedings, appeared to be lost in his own memories. Directly ahead of this elder’s warm gaze, Ikta raised his left hand to eye height as if suddenly remembering something.

“Haro, I do have something that needs your urgent attention. I actually just cut my hand……”

“Ah…… OK! Let me take a look at the wound, I’ll immediately begin disinfecting and treating…… Eh…… Waaah! H, how come there’s nothing there?! Mr. Ikta, why is your finger gone!?”

“What?” “Did you say finger gone……?”

Even Matthew and Torway came running over wide eyes. Having heard about the “negotiation tactics” before hand, Captain Sazaruf kept mum on the subject, to which Ikta replied back with a cheeky smile.

“Well~ My hand slipped while I was using a knife……”

“What did you do so that a slip took off your entire little finger? Where is the part that was cut off!?”

“I chopped it in three and gave it to a girl as a gift.”

“Is that some sort of curse!?”

Captain Sazaruf chuckled wryly as he watched the five of them squabbling together before lighting a new cigarette. I really wish there’s some way I can get all of these noisy kids back home alive — he thought.

Nejimaki Seirei Senki – Tenkyou no Alderamin - Volume 3 - Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Thunderflare. Even in the annals of the Imperial Army, there was no comparable fireline on the same scale of the operation that bore this name.

By the time Yatori's Incendiary Corps arrived at the Gagarukasakan Forest that was on the northern front of the Grand Arfatra Mountains, the time until the enemy was upon them was just under 3 days and 11 hours. This was all the time that remained to them to construct an obstacle capable of halting 12000 men.

"From here on out, carry out your orders and proceed to your assigned stations in squads to began arson activities! There is no need to inquire for further instructions at every step, but send a messenger to report any complications that arise!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Excellent reply. Now that you understand your orders, dismissed!"

The fiery-haired commander had given the word, so the soldiers immediately scattered to the east and west. Inwardly, Yatori also wished to charge with them, but this time she was ordered ahead of time to remain in the camp currently being constructed that was to be their headquarters. The reason lay in that she was the most experienced incendiary expert here.

After sending off her subordinates, Yatori turned to run her eyes over the status of their base of operations. This location had also turned into a scorching battlefield. The majority of the soldiers were similarly opening the large rapeseed bags supplied from the rear and feeding the contents to hundreds of fire spirits — all so that the spirits could spit the oil back into the bags. Once this was done, the oil was ready to be the catalyst in their fire operations, so the full bags were immediately carried to the front lines.

Both the work pace and distribution of tasks devised by Yatori were highly simplistic. She divided the southern edge of the Gagarukasakan Forest into 86 zones and ordered the squads responsible for fire to head each zone while the headquarters in the rear produced and resupplied fuel. While directing the supply and production of oil, Yatori also remained at the base to handle any and all other circumstances that could arise. If a situation arose that necessitated her presence elsewhere, Captain Sazaruf would assume command at headquarters.

The ratio of fire spirits remaining at headquarters versus being dispatched to the fire zones was approximately 9:1. As this number signified, the majority of the fire spirits were irreplaceable assets in obtaining oil from the rapeseeds. The ones who were actually active on the frontlines were the wind spirits guiding the flames each time one was ignited.

"OK, start fanning the flames!"

Obeying Matthew's orders, the wind spirits of his subordinates began sending out fresh air from the wind tunnel in their bodies. The oil liberally applied beforehand also did its

work, allowing the flames supplied by oxygen to burst into a merry blaze. In a flash, tongues of fire tore into the Gagarukasakan Forest that was more dry forest than lush foliage.

“It’s just as Ik-kun said, the wind is blowing towards the northeast…… No, it’s still a little weak.”

Working in another zone than Matthew, Torway couldn’t help but pray that they received a little divine providence when remembering how wide the flames must spread. As long as the appropriate wind was on their side, the flames would progress even without further input; however, should favorable winds not appear, then extra legwork would be involved to make things happen. Setting aside the consequences if their task ends in failure, considering what was looming on the horizon, it was best to conserve whatever energy they could for their troops already exhausted by lengthy conflict.

“Whew…… Whew……”

In another zone, Ikta himself could be seen mixed among his subordinates while swinging an ax. The hour for taking it easy as a commander had long since passed. Now was an emergency situation where he had to throw himself into physical labor as well.

“Whew…… Whew…… Hurk! That hurts……!”

The wrenching pain that tore through his left hand like fire almost caused Ikta to drop the ax. There was no need to verify the reason, as the bandage covering his little finger was stained completely red.

While Haro had already closed the wound with stitches, simply that alone was naturally unable to completely repair that sort of injury. Waiting a few seconds for the pain to fade, Ikta was about to immediately throw himself back into the fray when, unable to stand it any longer, Sergeant Suuya tried to convince him otherwise.

“Commander! You’ve done enough……! Please leave the rest to us and take a break!”

“Your sentiment thrills me to no end, Suuya…… But this is a situation that would get us all killed if I take the lazy way out.”

Ikta shook his head with a wry smile on his face while swinging the ax stained with his own blood back at the tree in front of him…… Of course, he was well aware that invalids forcing themselves to work will not provide any benefit to the task at hand and were likely to impede progress as well.

Nonetheless, his attitude was being witnessed by the soldiers around them. The sight of their usually lackadaisical commander hard at work while bleeding hammered home the idea of “how desperate their situation really was” in the post literal way possible. Faced with this scene, not a man among them was going to take it easy. Besides for the obvious fact that no subordinate could be lazing about while their commander was working, the more important reason was because Ikta’s example clearly conveyed the truth that “laziness was the same as death now”.

Of course, such an example does carry the risk of undesired after effects. Some soldiers may despair after realizing “Is our current predicament that terrible?” after desert their

posts. “In order to prevent soldiers from faltering, the commanding officer must always adopt a leisurely pose” was one of the first fundamentals for officers when it came to leading men.

On the other hand, Ikta had a history of surviving previous engagements with the least amount of casualties. From his subordinates’ perspective, he was undoubtedly a reliable commanding officer. Rather than causing his troops to waver, the sight of Ikta silently swinging his ax despite his injury only galvanized his men that “this was the time to put our backs into it”.

“Hey……!”

The decisive blow on the trunk caused the tree to collapse with a crash after being unable to sustain its own weight. One tree fell across the path at practically a perpendicular angle. This was a calculated outcome, as the surrounding soldiers had also hewed the trees across the path.

Ikta turned his head around to find his soldiers had already chopped down enough tree to cover nearly 100 yards down the path. After letting out a breath, he mopped away the sweat beading on his forehead.

“……Alright, this is enough to extend the conflagration. We don’t need to bring down any trees in the next area. All we need to do is cut a deep enough groove so that the trees will fall down in this direction once aflame. The fire will clean up everything else for us.”

Hearing Ikta’s instructions, the soldiers bedeviled by ruptured blisters all wore relaxed expressions. However, seeing as the young man’s left hand was in far worse condition, no one uttered a word of complaint.

There were five paths wide enough for an army to march through the Gagarukasakan Forest. Ikta’s group was currently positioned near the one closest to the center, a path that averaged 40 yards wide, far wider than another of the others. Aiming to move a large amount of troops through the forest at all possible speed, there was a high chance the Holy Aldera Army would come through here. Precisely why this location was seen as a vital point of operations.

Furthermore, even if they successfully induced a wildfire, any gap where the trees were hewn down may leave a gap in the flames. Hence why they needed to use this method of cutting down trees along the path to cover the openings left by the flames.

“……Once the arson preparations have finished, we must immediately erect a barricade here.”

Ikta muttered to himself, causing Sergeant Suuya to raise her head while replacing the bandage around his left hand.

“So it was impossible to stop the enemy with fire alone after all……?”

“No, we should be able to make this terrain impassable…… Yet, our mission is not to prevent the enemy from passing the forest, but to cause to be unable to proceed further from here. In order to achieve this objective, we may have to open the lid here depending on how the situation unfolds.”

Hearing her commander several years her junior deliver such a profound statement, Suuya continued dressing his injury while sneaking a peek at Ikta. She was unable to fathom exactly what sort of future was being envisioned by those black eyes.

In another theater, the 200 reinforcements from the Shinaak Tribe led by Nanak Dar were currently headed for the forest path that was slightly in the east.

Taking into account of the lingering friction, any plan that envisioned them working side by side with Imperial soldiers was nothing more than a pipe dream and swiftly discarded. Their current designation was “an independent unit led by Nanak who had accepted Ikta’s request”, so right now their only point of contact was handing off the oil resupply.

“Step lively and hurry up! If we don’t get this started quickly, those Alderamin bastards will go right through the forest!”

“Ah…… Yes……!”

Nanak led the Shinaak Tribesmen into the task at hand, but her countrymen were looking at her askance. This was only to be expected. After all, just when they had just been defeated in that quagmire of a war, here comes the Holy Aldera Army attacking from the north and all of a sudden their chieftain who was the first to rise against the Empire was now exhorting her fellows to cooperate with the Empire. Things were proceeding at such a rapid pace that exceeded their ability to comprehend.

However, this confusion was not enough to shatter their unity. Although Nanak was currently the leader of a defeated host, she still possessed leadership over the tribe. Not a single person accused her of being a “traitor” after ordering the tribe into battle against the Empire. Even now, the Shinaak people continued to obey the orders issued by their young chief.

Nor were there many among them who held it against Nanak for losing to the Empire. It was the unanimous decision of the entire Shinaak Tribe to declare war against the Empire, she just happened to be standing at the forefront of that movement.

Everyone understood that the responsibility for the defeat fell onto each of their shoulders. If anyone was to be an exception, then that person would be Nanak herself. She was deeply ashamed that she was unable to led her people to victory and resolved that her final duty was to ensure as many of her people survived through this as possible.

“Begin felling the trees from areas that have finished preparations! We’re already a step behind the others, so there’s no time to rest!”

Nanak gave her orders in a grave tone while throwing herself into work. Using her every inch of her petite body to swing the ax, a sudden thought ran across her mind — a hand missing the little fingers must find it incredibly difficult to hold an ax.

Ikta and company worked for 3 days and 14 hours. Validating Torway’s assessment, 12000 men of the Ra Sai Alderamin Holy Army arrived at the northern fringes of the Gagarukasakan Forest at the peak of their readiness.

The fervor of holy war burned within the breast of each “crusader” wearing the dark blue

uniform. Standing shoulder to shoulder, their combined presence seemed to fill the earth as they sang their praises to the high god as one. The chorus of 12000 men reverberated through the Grand Arfatra Mountains, seeking to cover the Shinaak lands with the divine authority.

Amidst this dominant formation, a sturdy man carried himself with the charisma befitting the warleader of 10000 men. His stature was both towering and broad, his head cleanly shaven to even reflect the sun overhead, all along with a tight mouth.

Though he was somewhat lacking for a soldier of a thousand battles, he did carry the appropriate air of a devout priest. This general who bore this duality was the general leading the Holy Aldera Army, Akugarpa Sa Domeisha.

“Kah — It’s absolutely suffocating! Gives one the impression of being a smoked ham hanging in a smokehouse! Hahaha!”

Yet, the moment he opened his mouth, fully half of that initial impression — being the devout priest aspect — was immediately overturned. His adjutant heaved a sigh beside him — as one in service of god, this general’s words were far too coarse.

Regardless, General Akugarpa had hit the nail on the head with his feelings. The dense smoke flowing through the forest covered the surrounding scenery in a murky gray. A single breath of this into the lungs brought about stabbing pain and sent the soldiers hacking and coughing.

While the general and his men fully revelled in their shared complaints of “how suffocating it was”, the forward scouts with their reconnaissance report. Among the forward troops that had dispatched to the east and west to observe the situation, an officer whose face had been blackened by the smoke made the report on behalf of the group.

“Reporting in, General! We have verified that the five paths leading through the Gagarukasakan Forest have all been blocked by fallen trees and wildfire! Currently, we are unable to proceed!”

“I thought as much! ……Speaking of which, to think the enemy could set the entire forest ablaze! What madness! Surely an act that befits men who are utterly pressed into a corner! Gahahaha!”

General Akurga burst into laughter while his adjutant, Colonel Michelin, diplomatically chimed in from the side.

“Any delay here would impact our moves to pursue the enemy’s main force. What are your orders?”

“This hardly bears saying. Go put out that damn fire immediately.”

“Since you have given the order…… But realistically speaking, how are we going to go about that?”

“Hm, I’m assuming everyone going over and pissing on the fire would be insufficient?”

“That is indeed a novel concept, but I fear we will be unsuccessful.”

The adjutant sternly vetoed that proposal. General Akurga folded his arms over his chest and began contemplating the situation.

“……Then perhaps I should join in.”

“General, I warrant that if your entire lower body was a bladder, you would do nothing more than douse the ground beneath your feet.”

“Gah — how aggravating! Leaving the fire alone is out of the question! Hey, Michelin, call that scruffy lad over here!”

Colonel Michel didn’t immediately act on the order and adopted a grimace.

“……We haven’t even officially struck a blow in this campaign yet. Do we have to rely on that person already?”

“What’s got you in a twist? All I want is to have that freeloader do a little bit of work. Regardless of whether he is a visiting officer, once that guy is part of the chain of command then he’s nothing more than my subordinate. What’s wrong with using this situation to order him about?”

That statement left Colonel Michelin without any rebuttal, so all he could do was order a cavalry trooper to hunt down their problem child. Before the two of them could even change the subject, a young man with white hair could be seen spurring his horse to meet them. The uniform about his shoulders was not dark blue, but an entirely different deep green.

“Yah, General, you have summoned me? It is an honor to be called upon!”

Colonel Michelin sourly glared at the officer speaking from atop the horse with a lively cadence.

“Major, first you need to dismount. In this army, that is the minimal respect demanded towards superiors.”

“Pardon my manners! According to my predictions, I will need to be leaving shortly on horseback, so I accidentally took the lazy route.”

Without a hint of a regret, the man leapt off the horse and turned himself to face the two superior officers. General Akurga couldn’t help but snort at this fearless attitude.

“You got here within two minutes? You seem to be highly energetic today as well, lad.”

“Syah, that is my only advantage — I’m sure you would like me to come up with some sort of countermeasure to this situation?”

“If you can’t think of anything, then you will be joining in the pissing brigade.”

“Hah…… What an original idea, though alas I have no urge to urinate right now……”

File:Alderamin v03 bw.m.105.png

“Is that so? So long as it’s a fluid, there’s no need to fixate on urine……”

General Akurga took the wind musket from his adjutant and made a show of examining the bayonet attached to the musket while glancing at the other man’s neck. With a clap, the young man with white hair seemed to have come up with an idea.

“Even if you chop my head off and wrung my entire body like a rag, I fear you wouldn’t get much liquid out of the hassle. Let’s consider this from another angle. Water is not

necessarily what you need when fighting a fire.”

“Hm? Then what are you going to use against the conflagration in front of us?”

“Mum, well, as the good saying goes — a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye. Let’s light a fire of our own.”

Hearing the other man’s nonchalant words, General Akurga’s eyes widened.

At the same time on the other side of the fire, a young man with black hair was currently observing the sight of the forest crumbling before the roaring flames.

“Whew…… Looks like we made it in time…… Although we were the instigators, but we did merrily set it alight, Kusu.”

“That’s not that important. Ikta, the wound on your left hand has opened again.”

While the spirit companion riding in the bag around his waist expressed genuine concern, Ikta wore a revolted expression.

“Nope, not looking at it…… It hurts enough that I want to cry, so looking at it would make it even worse……”

“But, it’ll grow worse if you leave it alone.”

Without any recourse, Ikta could only hunt through his pockets for a replacement bandage, but his fingers closed in on nothing. Now that he thought about it, the large pile of bandages he had stuffed in there earlier had already been dipped into four or five times.

“—Ah, as expected. I was thinking you were probably all out by now.”

Materializing like a miracle was Haro with a medkit tucked under her arm. Without a word, she came to a stop next to the young man and unwrapped the dirty bandage to gaze at the wound. Then, she used her companion, the water spirit Miru, to conjure clean water to wash away the grime on the wound’s surface.

“The wound broke open again…… Didn’t I tell you to keep movement to a minimum?”

“Sorry, sorry. Although if you’re only talking about the injury, then I can slightly let it rest from now on. After all, my inept mission of imitating a lumberjack has already come to an end…… Ouch!”

Exposed to the air, the wound sent out a particularly strong lance of pain, forcing a cry from Ikta’s mouth. Hearing the shriek, Haro raised her eyes to look upon his face.

“……Please do not force yourself. The finger is one of the parts on the human with most nerves, and now Mr. Ikta has sliced off the entire finger from the root……”

“……Urk! I, it’s OK, I feel a lot better compared to the first night it was cut off.”

Even now, Ikta could feel a chill down his spine whenever he recalled that sleepless night in the tent where he could only roll around in agony. Likewise, Haro seemed to share in his pain as she imagined his suffering while handing a palm-sized bag from her medkit to Ikta.

“……If the pain becomes overwhelming, please chew on this for a bit. It should help

alleviate the pain.”

After receiving the bag and loosening the drawstring, Ikta found dark herbs stuffed to capacity within. An instant after seeing this, a smile of salvation spread across the young man’s face.

“These are cocoa leaves, right? Thanks a bunch. Can you really give such a large ration to me alone?”

“Don’t worry about that, but please restrain your intake each time. Using too much at a time can be dangerous.”

Ikta lightly nodded at the kind warning before using his fingertips to pop a few leaves into his mouth. After a few chews, the contents began mixing into his saliva and the portions that came into contact with his mouth before feeling slightly numb.

“How nostalgic…… There was a time when I had studied with Old Man Anarai on what was the best way to utilize these things. Although we initially were seriously considering medical applications, my half-hearted joke at boiling these in sugar water created an deviously delicious juice. Since the possibility of overdosing was simply too high, the recipe was immediately sealed. Should that taste ever be released, I’m sure it would immediately take the world by storm, but now I wonder when it will see the light of day……”

Ikta closed his eyes reminiscing while the pain receded. Here, Haro piped up:

“Mr. Ikta. When you’re feeling really down, please do find a person to talk to. And I don’t mind just about your injury……”

“Ha, my thanks Haro, but you’re reading too much into it. Do I look like the type to knuckle down and bear with the pain?”

“……I heard from Ms. Yatori earlier that you were once on excellent terms with the chieftain of the Shinaak Tribe.”

Haro was not fooled by Ikta’s cheery attitude and dove straight into the subject. For a moment, Ikta was robbed of any words.

“From the start of the war until now, Mr. Ikta, you haven’t had any time that you could completely unburden yourself, correct?”

“……That’s a bit of a stretch. Once the war began stagnating, everyone has been bearing with it too, right?”

“That may be true. However, Mr. Ikta has been asked to take on much more than anyone else.”

After providing a clean bandage, Haro once again turned a pained look at the young man’s left hand that was missing a finger that should be there. Unable to withstand her eyes, Ikta hid the left hand behind his back.

“My apologies for interrupting your conversation, but a report just came in. The enemy is on the move.”

This sudden yet austere voice that interrupted their dialogue came from Yatori and Captain

Sazaruf as they came from their position closer to the mountains. After saluting the captain, Ikta and Haro turned to face the two of them.

“Good work, both of you. How is Lieutenant Ikta’s left hand doing?”

“A new little finger has not yet made itself known, though I put that down to a lack of good food recently?”

Since their fireline operation capable of stopping the enemy advance had been completed, they were able to recover a little leisurely time to engage in chit chat. The captain was highly reassured by Ikta’s loose cannon of a mouth and turned his gaze towards the mountain.

“Still, what a wondrous feeling — to think we would be relying on our allies to the rear for intel on the enemy’s movements. Although it does make sense that our higher vantage point gives us a clear view of the enemy’s position on the other side of the mountain……”

“Please chalk this up to our terrain advantage. Since our forces are desperately outnumbered, even splitting off troops for reconnaissance would be difficult.”

“Even if we did send out scouts, there’s still a wall of fire of our creation in front of us — let’s get to the heart of the matter.”

Yatori ended the small talk and brought up the real subject.

“This is the report that came from the rear, the enemy seems to have set a fire of their own in the forest.”

Haro was the only one who adopted a shocked expression at this news, whereas Ikta’s expression hardened even though he too heard of this for the first time.

“……A controlled burn, eh? So the other side has also taken decisive action.”

A wary glint edged its way into those dark pupils. Controlled burn was a method that could be employed when normal tactics like spraying water or swatting could not adequately fight a fire that was spreading rapidly. It’s literal application was to heads towards where the fire was predicted to advance and lit a flame under carefully controlled circumstances, causing everything that could serve as fuel to burn itself out before putting out the flames. A burnt out zone like this would in and of itself prevent the fire from carrying into other areas. From a results perspective, the maximum extent of the fire could be limited just as the time it took to bring the fire under control could be decreased, but……

“A single mistake could cause the fire to spread even further, so this tactic is not lightly employed…… Is there an officer who has experience with forest fires in the Holy Aldera Army?”

“And the decision was made at an abnormally swift speed. It’s barely been two days since the enemy arrived, but they have already enacted countermeasures already.”

“Exactly. “Discovering the entire forest is on fire during their march” should come as a rude shock to them, so I had honestly expected them to mill about in confusion for a bit. Our mission to buy time should have been easier while the enemy commanders debated over a possible solution……”

Finding his earlier projections thrown out the window so soon caused Ikta to mutter and scratch at his scalp. Yatori also pressed a hand to her chin as she pondered this.

"……I also find this peculiar. This is not because we're underestimating the enemy, but basically speaking the Holy Aldera Army comes from Ra Sai Alderamin, a country that has remained neutral from any major conflicts for more than 100 years, correct? Would an army from such a country be able to react to unforeseen circumstances with such alacrity?"

"What about this? Perhaps the one who came up with the controlled burn was not a soldier from that country?"

Captain Sazaruf suddenly interjected into the conversation, causing Ikta and Yatori to raise their heads at the same time.

"……Captain, what do you mean?"

"All of you must have ran across this in class, right? In order to maintain the military standards of a country like Ra Sai Alderamin that had nothing to do with war for so long, both the Empire and Republic sent military instructors. From a political perspective, a neutral country that was too weak was not a desirable outcome for either country."

"That must be what they call a visiting officer…… So that's the background behind it."

"Under the current situation, the personnel dispatched from the Empire must be on pins and needles, right? Then again, what about the ones sent from the Republic? If we treat the Kioka Republic as the one who instigated the entire sequence of events by inciting the Shinaak Tribe to rebel, then……"

Captain Sazaruf did not finish the words with ulterior interpretations. Yatori placed a hand over her forehead as if trying to search her memories.

"……While we were in Central, I had heard someone mention this. Two years ago, the officer dispatched from the Kioka Republic to Ra Sai Alderamin was incredibly young by conventional standards, and he had a head full of white hair to boot. Irrespective of night or day, he worked harder than anyone else to the point that no one ever saw him retire to rest."

"Incredible, it's practically as if god created someone else to balance the scales against me."

"Yeah, that's what I thought when I first heard this. This officer bears a nickname, which should be —"

"OK! Light it!"

Upon hearing the sergeant give the order, a certain Incendiary trooper within the Holy Aldera Army clumsily tossed the firebrand into the grass before him. His comrades were carrying out similar tasks all around him as fire broke out to the left and right, but perhaps something had gone wrong as the area he was responsible for remained free of smoke.

"You there! How come it isn't burning!? What are you doing?"

"Ah…… Yes……!"

After being scolded by his superior, the soldier brought a skin filled with oil and frantically scrambled into the bushes.

“Damn it, have I poured enough yet……?”

The man muttered as he liberally applied the oil on the surrounding undergrowth. At this time, he was suddenly aware of a rather warm air caressing him around his feet, where he had rather lost track of while immersed in this task.

“……How warm……?”

Shocked, the soldier direct his gaze downward to find laughing flames mocking him from beneath the knees of his uniform. The firebrand he had thrown in earlier had somehow managed to get onto him.

“Ah…… Wah!”

Although the soldier tried to put out the flames in a haphazard manner, his efforts at brushing them away yielded no results. The tongues of fire that gradually traveled upward caused the soldier to even ignore his spirit’s cries as he delved into utter panic.

“H, help me! I’m on fire……!”

Even his comrades were terrified out of their wits when he stormed out of the underbrush with his lower body aflame. There was no large source of water nearby to put the fire out. Wary of also sharing his fate, everyone the soldier sought for help kept him at arm’s length.

“S, someone think of something! Help!”

Denied any aid, the soldier’s panic mounted. However, before his cries became tragic, the sound of hoof beats rang out behind him. In the next instant, someone pulled the soldier up by the collar and lifted his entire body into the air.

“Wah……!” “Yah, do not worry! Stop struggling now!”

The rider continued to gallop forward with his right hand lifting the soldier along. Taking full advantage that the soldier had gone docile from behind lifted by the neck, he rapidly passed through the stunned crowd.

“Hay!”

Along the way, the rider suddenly released the right hand wrapped around the soldier’s collar. Gravity pulled the soldier’s body downward into a hole that was dug into the ground ahead of time. The soldiers holding spades around the hole while waiting for further orders could only stare in shock.

“Alright, you men, quickly cover him in dirt! Wepssy! Quickly, quickly!”

Halting a few steps in front of them, the rider immediately roused the men to action as they carried out his orders. Their spades dug into the dirt mound and sought to bury the lower half of their comrade that was currently aflame. Though the man in question shrieked in pain, no one paid him the slightest attention.

“Good! The fire is out……!”

The soldier was buried into the dirt from the neck down as the spades finally came to a halt. Just as the soldier felt like a corpse being covered in dirt, the man responsible for bringing him over here gave him a once over from atop the horse with those white eyes of his.

“Hah, thank goodness we made it in time. Medics! Please take care of his burns.”

Hearing this, the soldier finally realized he had been saved. Deprived of oxygen by the large amount of wet dirt, the flames that should have consumed him were extinguished. Without a large body of water nearby, this was the ideal way of putting out fires.

“T…… Thank you very —”

Without bothering to hear the words of gratitude, the man who saved him was already spurring his horse elsewhere. The soldier could only watch the man depart at incredible speed while one his comrades holding a spade nearby said to him:

“He actually saved you twice. The first time was of course when he brought you over here. There is also the time that Kiokan predicted that guys like you would make silly mistakes and ordered a hole to be dug.”

It was only now that the soldier realized that man was not wearing uniform of the Holy Aldera Army. As he looked around in confusion, one of his comrades chuckled wryly.

“What, is this the first time you saw him with your own eyes? Even so, surely you have heard the rumors? Rumors regarding the one that gallops around by day and drafts reports by night, the man who came from distant Kioka without bothering to setup a sleeping pallet in his own room —”

Overwhelmed by their efforts to deal with the fire, the Holy Aldera Army welcomed their second night beneath the Grand Arfatra Mountains.

“—I’m coming in, Jean. I’ve brought tea.”

The sight that greeted the female adjutant who first called out a greeting before stepping inside was a desk covered in research materials illuminated by light spirits along with her commanding officer scrawling reports.

“Syool! Thank you, Miara. Is this red tea full of sugar? Or that slightly bitter green tea?”

The man named Jean kept his eyes glued to the table, but responded in a casual tone. The young female officer named Miara watched the back of that snow white head before sighing lightly.

“Seeing as these are military rations, it is unfortunately the barley tea you have grown heartily sick of in Alderamin.”

“Hah, just so. Although I do not loath it, I must admit this something altogether different than tea.”

Miara deposited the tea cup in the hands of the man who replied back to her with a rueful grin. At this time, she noticed among the myriad documents sprawled over the table, several leaflets carried lines written with a firm hand.

“You seem to be generously wasting resources. Was there something that caught your attention?”

“I am organizing the tactics we will be using into several categories, as our opponent looks to be quite a handful.”

“Quite a handful……? We haven’t even come to blows yet, right?”

“If would be much simpler if our opponent was someone whom we could readily engage in combat, but that is not the case. Our enemy quickly abandoned any hope of facing us directly and devoted all of their energy into buying time even at the cost of burning down the entire forest.”

“That’s true. This is the first time I’ve run into this kind of situation.”

Here, Jean exchanged the pen in his right hand for the teacup as he turned his entire chair to face his adjutant. He possessed a slim yet sturdy physique, a head full of white hair without the use of any hair dye, along with youthful features that stood in stark contrast to his hair. These were accompanied by his white eyes, eyes that gave men the mistaken impression that they glimmered with ethereal light.

“Mum…… Not only is this strategy daring, but their execution is superb. Even if they picked men from their exhausted forces, carrying out all this with the Shinaak Tribe threatening them from behind their back compounds the difficulty. Thus, our opponent must have planned for that…… I suspect they must have come to terms with the tribal leaders in the form of a ceasefire or by uniting against the common enemy that our forces represent.”

“Uniting against? I find it difficult to imagine working alongside enemies trying to kill each other the day before. Could their self esteem survive that?”

“Yah, what you say is true……. However, no matter how favorable the calculation is, the Imperial Army could not possibly have detected our presence more than 6 days in advance. We just arrived here yesterday, so their original buffer was only around 5 days. During this time, they had to end the civil war, successfully persuade the Shinaak Tribe to lend their assistance, then dispatch the necessary personnel to begin operations…… Given the results, they completed the defenses needed to halt our invasion.”

Jean’s smile deepened as a fey sense of expectation slowly crept in.

“At this desperate hour, who is this man that could accomplish all this with the Imperial Army in tatters?”

“……”

“Inciting the Shinaak Tribe and assassinating Yuskushiram Taekk…… These elements were critical in launching this insurrection. However, the fundamental basis of all this was built on the ineptitude of the Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Garrison, Lieutenant General Tamshiikushik Safida. If he possessed the ability and self-control as befitting a man of his station, we would never have had the opening in the first place.”

“The tragedy of fools in high positions is a rather commonplace event.”

“Syah, as you say. However, careful study of history also contain examples of the

opposite. Examples of brilliant men denied their full potential by woeful superiors but repeatedly demonstrating their outstanding talent on the battlefield."

Jean said this as his eyes drifted over to the map on the table. His heated gaze was directed to the tags showing the other side of the Gagarukasakan Forest, where a worthy foe awaited him.

"This person does not possess high rank. If this was the case, the situation would have improved much sooner. Must be a case of a lower officer receiving a battlefield promotion along with broad range of authority. Is he or she a colonel like me? Maybe a captain…… Even if a staff officer, perhaps on the lower end of the totem pole. Regardless, this person is on the other side of the wall of fire."

"In other words, this enemy will be quite the handful. Excited, Jean?"

"I want to behold someone I've never seen before, surely everyone would think the same?"

Miara could sigh in response to Jean's obliviousness to any oddity in himself and retreated one step. After reestablishing the space between leader and subordinate with this action, she reported in a solemn tone.

"……Thus far, our allied forces encamped in the mountains have not reported in. We surmise that this is because they are cut off from our forces and that long periods of activity behind enemy lines have exhausted their supply of carrier pigeons."

"Even your older brother would have some difficulty traversing that fire…… The controlled burns will need some time before they achieve any effects, so perhaps we should consider options to reestablish communications?"

"I estimate that more carrier pigeons will be released at dawn, so for now that is sufficient…… Even if we left them alone, they will act accordingly to disrupt the enemy camp. After all, this is the Phantoms' duty."

Seeing Miara put forth such a strong guarantee as if it was her own task in question, Jean nodded in satisfaction.

"—Understood. Given the current stage, there are few options for reestablishing communications anyways. We will focus on our own objectives and leave your brother's unit to their own devices. Is that alright, Lieutenant Miara Gin."

"I have no objections. It is an honor to have your trust, Colonel Jean Arkinex."

Jean chuckled wryly at his adjutant saluting smartly before changing the subject.

"The hour is late, Miara. Take a break."

"As you command. So Jean, how do you plan on passing the long night?"

"Mum, based on today's observations, I must account for the errors on our maps and terrain as well as calculate the additional supplies needed due to the delay of our invasion. Then, I will assess the proper allocation of soldiers along the five paths through the forest. After that, I let my imagination take me to morning. Imaging what sort of worthy foe awaits me on the other side of that fire."

This speech, so similar to a young girl in love, struck Miara in the wrong way, causing her to sigh and try to dampen his ardor.

“That is all well and good, but please don’t get your hopes up. In order to imagine someone strong enough to threaten you, it would be far easier to visualize what god looks like — at least, that’s how I would feel.”

Miara left these words behind and ducked out of the tent. However, she ran into a familiar face at the doorway.

“Ho, Miara, you were here as I expected.”

Here was a swarthy man wearing the same Kioka uniform who towered over others. He was approximately in his 30s, rippled with muscles, and had a captain’s pins on his chest.

“Captain Harrah, you are also up at such hours.”

Like Jean, the man named Harrah had an easy-going personality and treated others with kindness that surpassed the basic relationship between leader and subordinates. After checking that there was no one else, Miara also relaxed a little.

“Jean is inside. Is something the matter?’

“There is something, but talking to you would be faster. Have we got in touch with the infiltrating unit?”

“Not yet. I just gave the report to Jean and the conclusion is to continue as we are. Besides from sending the carrier pigeons, our forces do not need to take further actions to reestablish communications.”

“If that is Jean’s decision, I have no objection…… But, aren’t you worried about your brother, Miara?”

“Not really. My brother’s unit usually operates behind enemy lines, though with our advance blocked by the fire, we should be thankful that we have allies on the other side.”

Miara replied back to her superior officer’s concern with her typical aloofness. After making sure she was not putting up a tough front, Harrah turned his eyes from her to focused on the man hard at work in the tent.

“—Is Jean up to his usual tricks tonight?”

“Not only that, his eyes are particularly bright. Said something about a worthy foe in the enemy camp.”

“I can definitely echo that feeling. In all honesty, I was shocked at the deftness at which they carried out this defensive plan using a wall of fire. While I do not know what will happen next, depending on the situation, the Holy Aldera Army may lack the experience to react properly.”

With that, Harrah gazed at the mountains with a grim expression. Looking upon the fire that was especially conspicuous at night, Miara smiled as if unconcerned.

“Even if that’s the case, then all I feel is pity towards the heroes waiting for us on the other side. Regardless what kind of talent or ability they possess, to stand on this stage and age was their mistake.”

“Hm, I can agree to that as well. If there was only the Holy Aldera Army here, then perhaps the enemy could find a way to handle them, but —”

The half finished sentence cued the two of them to turn their eyes back to the tent together. Between the tent flaps, their commander’s ramrod straight back could be seen. Even though his figure was just sitting there, his boundless energy was readily apparent, along with the effortless dance of his pen that knew not what exhaustion meant.

“How dependable — our “Shining Sleepless General” once again is undisturbed by dreams.”

“Those white eyes burn with fire, all to guarantee the path to victory.”

An unyielding trust that bordered on faith rested in the hearts of both Miara and Harrah as they seemed to play a game of words back and forth. The man in question was wholly oblivious to the conversation behind him as handled the tasks with unrelenting motions while contemplating about his unseen enemy in a corner of his mind.

—Colonel Jean Arkinex of the Kioka Republican Army. Known as the “Shining Sleepless General” among men.

A legendary figure who was lauded in the same manner as the “Wise General of Indolent Victory” by future chronicles of the age.

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